

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media

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Jump Cut was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in 1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

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["That girl's got it!": the unruly woman, romantic comedy, and sexual modernity](#)

by Claire Graman

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by Kathleen Karlyn

Two female figures—Diana, the protagonist of Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*, and Hillary Clinton—put the issue of female power on the cultural and political agenda in 2017, and while one is fictional and the other real, both demonstrate the ways female unruliness triggers strong emotions, from tears to fear and rage.

SPECIAL SECTION: THE CLAUDE JUTRA AFFAIR

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[The "Affaire Jutra" and the figure of the child](#)

by Julianne Pidduck

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["Fix yer tie!" an ekphrastic reply to Jutra's ekleipsis](#)

a visual poem by John Greyson

A poetic repudiation of the righteous witchhunt culture that seeks to consign every Jutra street sign to the smug scrap heap of denial.

[À tout prendre: an introduction](#)

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[Black bodies, queer desires: Québécois national anxieties of race and sexuality in Claude Jutra's *À tout prendre* \(1963\)](#)

by Gregorio Pablo Rodríguez-Arbolay Jr.

An exploration of early queer subtext and (de)colonial performance of black female subjectivity in Claude Jutra's *À tout prendre* (1963). The film reveals the anxieties of modern Québécois national (hetero)sexuality vis-à-vis the progressive cultural politics of modernity, secular nationalism, and anti-colonialism of the Quiet Revolution.

["Do you like boys?" Claude Jutra's disappearances: confession, courage, cowardice](#)

by Thomas Waugh

An essay on Claude Jutra's 2 disappearances, in 1996 and 2016 respectively. In the aftermath of the 2016 Jutra scandal that "disappeared" him, I parse Jutra's New Wave coming-out autofiction *À tout prendre* (1963), onscreen confession and offscreen context, and then migrate to Jutra's six fiction and documentary films that testify to what I call "intergenerational eros." In doing so, I reclaim the term "pedophile" from the panic and abuse industries and reclaim his work and reappearance.

[Foundational fictions](#)

Excerpts from *Quebec National Cinema* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).
by Bill Marshall

In two outtakes from his important 2001 book *Quebec National Cinema*, Bill Marshall first draws on Deleuze to situate Claude Jutra's masterpiece *À tout prendre* [Take it all] as a "founding fiction" of Quebec national cinema; in the second section, he takes up Jutra as a auteur figure, tracing treatments of identity and Quebec national allegories across his filmography.

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Compiled by Julianne Pidduck, Alexis Poirier-Saumure and Thomas Waugh

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reviews by Chuck Kleinhans of

- Jon Lewis, *Hard-Boiled Hollywood: Crime and Punishment in Postwar Los Angeles*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017.
- Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, eds. *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2015)
- Zeinabu Irene Davis, *Spirits of Rebellion*, DVD, 101 min., Wimmen with a Mission Productions.
- James Naremore, *Charles Burnett: A Cinema of Symbolic Knowledge* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017)
- Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (DVD), Milestone Film and Video.

[Abu Ghraib in art history perspective](#)

review by Chuck Kleinhans of

Eisenman, Stephen F.. *The Abu Ghraib Effect*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007.

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[The story of the Flaherty Seminar](#)

review by Bill Stamets of

Patricia R. Zimmermann and Scott MacDonald, *The Flaherty: Decades in the Cause of Independent Cinema*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2017.

Book on Flaherty Seminar by two participant-observers self-interrogates more than self-congratulates.

THE LAST WORD

[Chuck Kleinhans 1942-2017: a personal memoir and a tribute](#)

by Thomas Waugh

A friendship since 1974.

[For Chuck Kleinhans: some thoughts on living in the Anthropocene](#)

by Jyotsna Kapur

In Chuck's study without him, some thoughts on bears, our species-being, and wishing for the end of the capitalocene.



The future of *Jump Cut*

by Julia Lesage

Many of *Jump Cut*'s readers will know that Chuck Kleinhans died suddenly last December of a heart attack. He was a co-founder and co-editor of *Jump Cut* as well as my spouse. Our other co-founder and co-editor, John Hess died several years ago, so that leaves me as the sole editor and the person who has to decide *Jump Cut*'s future. This decision is easy in the short term. I will expand the range of scholars I ask to critique manuscripts and write letters to authors, and I will continue to do the layout for at least the next two or three issues, which come out about once a year. In a state of grief, it is difficult to do long-term planning beyond this, but I would like to set down some of my thoughts about this process, so that readers can know the dimensions of these decisions still to make about *Jump Cut*.

First let me tell you some of what the co-editors long thought about *Jump Cut*.

We began *Jump Cut* with experience in the Underground Press in the 1970s. The 60s and 70s had seen a flourishing of tabloid periodicals using photo-offset printing. Think of the grocery store flyers delivered to your door once a week, and you can understand this as the bargain basement of printing. Also, consider the size and appearance of the page. Here's what costs more: each fold, each cut, each staple, each paper upgrade, each color. Those of you who knew our formats recognize the changes that came when we had a little more money to put in the printing: from tabloid paper to sturdier stock, from single fold to staple to more traditional magazine format with cut pages. Behind the scenes, we went from personal organizing of mass mailings to mailings done by the printer. In the meantime, and for the life of the print issues, our basements, attics, garages, and those of our parents filled up with back issues.

To pay for this, we did what we thought of as tithing for our art, each of us setting aside about a thousand dollars to pay for printing and mailing every issue. Because of John Hess' business ability, we were able to do this across the lifespan of *Jump Cut*'s paper publication. We adamantly did not seek outside funding, and this decision came both from observation of alternative cultural institutions and a political stance, one that I adhere to today and will influence any future decisions I make about *Jump Cut*. Here is the observation: you have to be able and willing to live within your income. If your project gets a grant, you get used to the extra funding. If the grant stops, and it probably will, it is hard to go back to doing the project with your original, skimpier resources. That's where lots of projects go under.

The political principle for not taking outside grants is more complex. Most obviously, he who pays the piper calls the tune. For example, university sponsorship may inhibit the discussion and presentation of sexuality in a print journal, particularly in terms of authors' presenting and analyzing images. But

there are other more insidious ways that financial sponsorship has an inhibiting effect. Less obviously, for example, *potential* censorship (i.e., fearing the cessation of a grant) leads to the maker's *self-censorship*, even in the planning of her project. That is, in the case of applying for grants, the applicant has to write a number of long documents outlining the project, its goals, its processes, and its "spinoff." That act of creation, writing the grant proposal, shapes how the person actually conceives of the project. It makes the whole project more conservative—in its range and in the kinds of risks it takes. And finally, writing for grant money takes a long time out of an artist or editor's creative life—the time devoted to art, politics, alternative cultural institutions—and this is particularly onerous for someone who has to work at something else, like teaching, to make a living, support a household and get health/retirement benefits, etc..

The advent of the Internet largely settled our financial problems. It is cheap to maintain a web site, and writers/editors can purchase easy layout programs that offer simple templates into which the layout person inserts photos and texts. Furthermore, we always had a target audience and a group of potential writers. That is, when we began *Jump Cut*, we understood that film studies as an academic discipline was just beginning and that we could influence its development, both in terms of attracting politically oriented writers and a potential readership. In that, we shared a Marxist outlook with *Screen* and both journals, along with *Women and Film* and then *Camera Obscura* contributed greatly to the development of film theory in the 80s and 90s as academic film studies grew.

However, in the era of tabloid publication, we also began *Jump Cut* with a simple, even playful decision, Let's start a movie journal. I always said *Jump Cut's* beginnings were like Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney saying, Let's put on a play, and I still think that. Anyone can physically start and maintain a journal. So what makes this one last 40 years?

In that regard, I've already discussed the money issue. There are some others. One is the mix of people who are involved, whether they can or will stick it out for the long run, and what capacities they bring to the project. In this case, John had the business sense, Chuck had the political savvy and was a kind of walking Wikipedia about political history and popular culture, and I had the mediamaking skills and a propensity for taking on long-term projects (I was responsible for the 5-year task of creating *Jump Cut's* digital archive of its old print issues). We all met as comparative literature graduate students and always thought of culture in broad international terms (John and I had lived for a number of years abroad, he in Germany, me in Peru). The three of us also had fierce disagreements and survived these like a marriage survives—somehow. When *Jump Cut* began, we formed collectives, principally in Berkeley and Chicago; these dwindled down over the years to a collective of just us three. In practical terms, over the years each of us probably put in about forty hours a month on the project, more during layout.

One of the options for *Jump Cut's* future that Chuck, John, and I discussed, in an easy chat that hardly took a half-hour, was that terminating the project at some specific date was fine. *Jump Cut* would have dates, beginning and end, a project with a specific history. It certainly has a personality, marked by its location in time and by our co-editorship. In fact, over the years, we never found someone to join us at the top editorial level, and thus some specific individual/s for me to turn *Jump Cut* over to. Free labor, personal financial contribution, intellectual astuteness, political awareness, long-term commitment, sexual/gender politics, broad cultural range, international perspective, aesthetic judgment (including embracing low culture), media production skills—who's up for such a job?

And if you are, why do it as *Jump Cut* and not put on your own play?

Postscript

I circulated a draft of this essay to about a dozen contributors and editors, after which a group of junior scholars asked that I include their response here:

"If you are interested in discussing *Jump Cut*'s future with a group of junior scholars thinking through how the journal's commitment to politically-oriented media studies scholarship might be reformulated for the future, please contact [Peter Alilunas](#), [Roxanne Samer](#), and [Greg Youmans](#)."

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Aspiring to be "cinematic": American Movie star Mark Borchardt tells Cory about New German Cinema in *California Dreams*.



Cory Zacharia shows his scooter skills in the California desert in *California Dreams*.



Atsuko and Rintaro assume themselves to be lost when they arrive in *LITTLEROCK*.

Small form films: the (non-)cinema of Mike Ott

by [Robert Campbell](#)

Since graduating from the California Institute of the Arts, where he studied, *inter alia*, under Thom Andersen and James Benning, Mike Ott has prolifically been making feature films as well as shorts and music videos on tiny budgets. Indeed, he has shot seven features in little over a decade, including

- his graduation film *Analog Days* (2006),
- the documentary *Kid Icarus* (with Carl Bird McLaughlin, 2008),
- a series of three films called *LITTLEROCK* (2010), *Pearblossom Hwy* (2012) and *Lake Los Angeles* (2014), which are referred to collectively as the Antelope Valley trilogy,
- *Actor Martinez* (with Nathan Silver, USA, 2016) and
- *California Dreams* (2017).

Between them, these films have won various awards, including at the Montréal Festival of New Cinema, the Cleveland International Film Festival, the AFI Fest and the Independent Spirit Awards. *LITTLEROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy*, *Lake Los Angeles* and *Actor Martinez* are all available on Amazon Video/Amazon Prime, while *LITTLEROCK* is also distributed on DVD by Kino Lorber, and *Actor Martinez* by Breaking Glass Pictures. A short, *Lancaster, CA* (2015), was in 2016 distributed on MUBI. Meanwhile, at time of writing *California Dreams* continues its festival run after premiering as part of the Critics' Week at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2017 and having its first screening in North America at the SXSW Film Festival in March—with esteemed film critic Richard Brody also naming *Actor Martinez* among his top films of 2017 in *The New Yorker*.^[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Making films set in locales about fifty miles from Hollywood, Ott uses the film industry and Hollywood style as an implicit reference in most of his films, but primarily in the sense that his own style is in a way counter-Hollywood. In addition, not being in Hollywood and not being “cinematic” have a metaphoric resonance across his work. His style is such that although he is prolific, having made numerous feature fictions, his films are largely unknown. His scripts are unobtrusively intellectual, usually wandering, and often emotional. He encourages fine acting from performers whom he uses repeatedly in his work, but does not give them the typically tight story arcs found in Hollywood scripts; rather, actors play out meandering narratives and often have speeches that seem to come from their own lives. As he puts it, he makes “small form films.”

Ott's films typically tell the story of disaffected young men and women who have aspirations to leave their homes and achieve success, often in the movies. However, Ott's protagonists regularly find themselves hampered by a combination of circumstances, including most often apathy, lack of talent, and

geography. More important, nearly all are marginalized by their low income, meaning that Ott's films present an opposition between labor/the need to work and cinema/a desire to "be cinematic." This opposition is often played out through characters' use of different media, including audio cassette and VHS video tapes, computers and videogames, and especially letter writing—all of which contrast to the characters' talking about wanting to be in movies. The narrative decision to follow characters who aspire to cinema but regularly settle for other "lesser" media can be read as deliberate, given the name of Ott's production company, Small Form Films.

Ott clearly places his work within an expansive history of cinema, making allusions and intertextual references to it within his films. But he also eschews spectacular narrative for an engagement with the mundane, unresolved and overlooked. Ott in this way embraces "small form." On the level of style and also narrative theme, his films constitute a different, perhaps even "non-cinematic" type of film, one in which unconventional, imperfect and makeshift families replace the cinematic mainstream of families with strong fathers and beautiful lovers. In addition, these films mostly play out against the desert backdrop of Antelope Valley; that location is fifty or so miles north of Hollywood but remains conceptually further from cinema than its geographical proximity to cinema's capital might suggest.

In embracing "small form," Ott does not offer "new media" as a "more democratic" alternative to cinema. Rather he suggests that cinema and/as the American way of life is in tension with the non-cinematic, which Ott paradoxically renders cinematic through his (digital) filmmaking practice. To say that more simply, Ott's cinema engages with ongoing issues of class in the contemporary United States. He uses the feature fiction medium against itself as a tool to critique the structuring role that media with "high production values" play in the U.S. class system. In people's lives, socially and imaginatively, to "become cinematic" is to have a better life. Fiction film, especially from Hollywood, is partially responsible for planting "cinematic aspirations" in viewers while demonstrating to them how their own lives are not cinematic. Hollywood presents itself as a would-be escape from class difference while simultaneously being a medium that reinforces it. Thus as Ott turns to creating a "small form," or perhaps even a non-cinema, he makes work that is both formally and thematically rich so that his is a rare if fragile voice in the U.S. fiction film landscape.

Film at the margins

The following is an episode that demonstrates the small scale of one protagonist's life and also Ott's playing with intertextual cinematic reference. At the end of *California Dreams*, protagonist Cory (played by regular Ott actor, Cory Zacharia) gets into a taxi to catch a flight to Germany to be in a movie directed by real-world filmmaker Henning Gronkowski. (Gronkowski plays himself in Ott's film though we only hear his voice over the phone; his forthcoming *Jung* (2018) is produced in real life by Mike Ott.) Driving the taxi is Mark Borchardt, a real-life horror filmmaker who is also at the center of Chris Smith's cult documentary, *American Movie* (1999). As Cory explains that he is off to Germany to make a movie, we hear the taxi driver talk enthusiastically about German filmmakers from Volker Schlöndorff to Wim Wenders, and from Rainer Maria Fassbinder to Werner Herzog. "Werner Hertz-dog?" replies Cory, seemingly oblivious to the New German precursors of his future boss Gronkowski.

I interpret this sequence as would-be star Cory's dream. Elsewhere in *California Dreams*, having been offered a part in Gronkowski's film, Cory summarily fails to raise the \$800 or \$900 that would get him to Europe, but as the film nears its climax he miraculously finds money strewn across the desert. Since his taxi ride is

thus funded by this miracle money, the scene with Borchardt seems a fantasy – a paradoxically cinematic fantasy that masks Cory’s failure to “become cinematic” by being in Gronkowski’s movie. That is, Cory may not know who his taxi driver is at the end of this film, but Ott surely does. And Ott’s casting Borchardt in that role is key, for Borchardt in Chris Smith’s documentary is shown as a filmmaker spending every last penny he has on putting together shoestring horror movies in and around Milwaukee. Borchardt is himself, then, a filmmaker associated with the idea of finding affirmation and/or validation in being or “becoming cinematic,” even though Smith’s film hilariously charts how Borchardt quixotically sets out on this quest with barely a clue and perhaps more courage than talent. Cory is in this way an unwitting successor to Borchardt; he aspires to become cinematic, but he is always an outsider to it.

As we shall see, Ott’s films regularly use these kinds of intertextual cinematic references (with *Kid Icarus* as a whole being something of a sister film to *American Movie*). The references add thematic depth and richness to his work and mark him as a focused cinephile director. However, using Borchardt as a character not only has thematic relevance to a plot also about a young man, Cory, seeking to be or to become “cinematic.” Using Borchardt also lets Ott situate his own work within the landscape of contemporary U.S. and international filmmaking. It is not that Ott follows Borchardt’s genre or style, but they do have something in common, in that Ott is something of an outsider to U.S. cinema – and unlike Borchardt perhaps wilfully so. Indeed, Ott is situated on the margins of even independent cinema, including the so-called mumblecore movement.

In fact, there are many commonalities between mumblecore and Ott’s work. Yannis Tzioumakis summarizes, for example, how

“only a handful [of mumblecore films have] secured theatrical distribution by one of the established distributors, and yet the majority have had substantial presence in some ancillary markets and alternative distribution outlets.”[2]

This kind of distribution strategy holds true of Ott’s work, which plays at selected festivals before relying primarily on ancillary markets to find audiences. Furthermore, Ott’s films to a certain extent resemble mumblecore by virtue of budget and theme. They are

“low-budget, digitally filmed feature films made by young, white, urban filmmakers about that privileged demographic’s struggles to find lasting personal relationships.”[3]

Indeed, *LiTTLE ROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy*, *Actor Martinez* and *California Dreams* all focus at least in part on single men looking for lasting personal relationships. In mumblecore films, as Aymar Jean Christian has defined a typical plotline, white male protagonists search for love and “the real.”[4] What is more, Ott’s films also share a concern for poverty with mumblecore, which Maria San Filippo defines as a “cinema of recession.”[5]

However, in other respects Ott’s work differs in key ways from mumblecore. First, with the exception of *Actor Martinez*, which takes place in Denver, Ott’s locales are not urban but rather set in the Californian desert. Second, only some of his films use a plot of the lonely male looking for love. On the one hand, repeatedly we see actor Cory Zacharia (called Cory as a character) looking for love in *LiTTLE ROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy* and *California Dreams*. In a similar vein, but not about love, *Actor Martinez* also features a would-be professional actor (Arthur Martinez) exploring his loneliness; in the plotline he acts in a film in which he plays a would-be professional actor exploring his loneliness as he acts in a film. But *LiTTLE ROCK* is more about the pilgrimage being made by two



Cory tries to forge a relationship with his brother Jeff in *Pearblossom Hwy*.



Cory talks about love and sex with Patrick in a parked car in *California Dreams*.



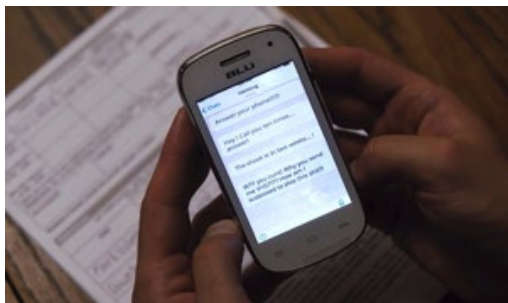
Arthur stands a lonely Latino drinking beer at a Film Grind meeting in *Actor Martinez*.



The economic crisis prompts migration for an immigrant in *Lake Los Angeles*.



Jordan (right) takes Atsuko and Cory for a ride on hipster bikes in *LITTLEROCK*.



Henning is angry at Cory's use of outmoded VHS technology in *California Dreams*.

Japanese siblings (played by Atsuko Okatsuka and Rintaro Sawamoto) to Manzanar, where their grandfather was interned as a prisoner of war during the Second World War. In fact, neither *Pearblossom Hwy* nor *California Dreams* feature Cory falling in love so much as learning in the first film to get along with his ex-marine brother, Jeff (John Brotherton), and developing a friendship/platonic romance (or “plomance”) with Japanese American woman Atsuko (referred often to as Anna, and played again by Atsuko Okatsuka). In *California Dreams*, he really develops no romantic relationships (although he flirts briefly with a woman at an acting workshop) even if he talks explicitly and at length about love and sex with various different people, including Asian American Patrick (Patrick Llaguno). In the complexity of his narratives, then, Ott is at pains to expand the world depicted beyond that of the white middle class male that defines mumblecore and to explore a much more racially diverse set of characters.

Indeed, although he never explicitly identifies himself as such, even Arthur in *Actor Martinez* is recognizable from his family name as coming from a Hispanic background, a milieu that is explicitly developed in *Lake Los Angeles*, which tells the story of illegal immigrants coming to California from Mexico, Cuba and other places south of the border. In its exploration of race, as well as in its exploration not simply of a newly-precarious white *bourgeoisie* but of a more precarious, multi-racial working class, Ott's cinema goes much deeper than mumblecore into the theme of “recession,” signaling a deeper economic crisis in the 2010s than that depicted in the first mumblecore films of the 2000s.

While Ott's films flirt with the tropes of hip masculinity that David Church identifies in both *Bellflower* (Evan Glodell, USA, 2011) and in mumblecore films as a whole, Ott's characters are either critiqued for their desire to find “authenticity” in the “retro” or his characters use “retro” technology because it is all that they have.[6] In *LITTLEROCK*, for example, Jordan (Brett L. Tinnes) seduces Atsuko through his hipster use of cassette tapes before turning out to be a cynical womanizer, while in *California Dreams*, Henning shouts at Cory for sending him an audition tape on VHS, even though it is the only technology that Cory has to provide Henning the performance that the latter needs in order to show Cory's acting chops to his producers. In addition, whereas Jordan and his friends Brody (Ryan Dillon), Garbo (Matthew Fling) and Marques (Markiss McFadden) come and go from Littlerock and drive cars, Cory in *LITTLEROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy* and in *California Dreams* must generally walk everywhere, with a BMX representing for Cory a genuine mode of transport as opposed to the hipster, retro leisure vehicle that it does for Jordan. In other words, Jordan is a “retro” hipster out of choice (and his performance gets him the girl), while Cory uses outmoded technologies out of necessity (and is punished for it).

Rather than figuring simply a hipster *performance* of poverty, then, Ott's films seem more genuinely to explore poverty, or what Anna Backman Rogers might with reference to contemporary U.S. independent cinema call the “crisis image,” one of people who are excluded from and who remain invisible to mainstream society. As Backman Rogers suggests,

“when you are not seen (when you are not rendered as ‘surface’), you cease to exist altogether.”[7]

This idea that being seen means existing chimes with Jonathan Beller's argument that the contemporary workings of capital are *cinematic*. As Beller suggests, under capitalism only that which attracts our attention is considered real, and that reality is then defined by the possibility of turning attention into profit. The techniques that are used to attract attention are the same techniques as those developed in cinema. As a result, cinema becomes the measure of capital, which in



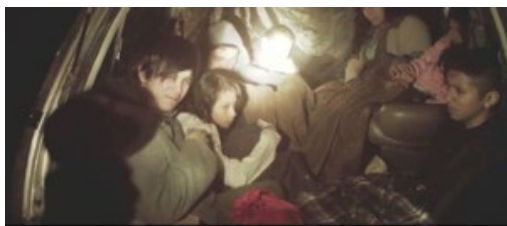
Making an unmarketable film: Mike and Nathan direct Arthur from a balcony in *Actor Martinez*.

turn becomes the measure of reality: if you are not seen, or if you are not profitable, then you cease to exist.[8]

In this respect, the increasing visibility of mumblecore directors like Joe Swanberg, Greta Gerwig, Lena Dunham and Jay and Mark Duplass signals the way in which the precarity and soul-searching seen in mumblecore films are indeed privileged and in some respects the acceptable, “cinematic” face of crisis. Ott’s films and the world(s) that they depict, meanwhile, remain significantly recessed from view. Not only has Ott *stayed out* of the mainstream, unlike the mumblecore directors mentioned above, but he seems to reject the mainstream, as per the dialogue of *Actor Martinez* where Mike (Ott playing himself) discusses with Arthur and co-director Nathan (Silver, also playing himself) how they do not want to make their film “marketable.” Small wonder that after having left Antelope Valley to make *Actor Martinez*, Ott returned home to make *California Dreams*, a much more modest project.

Ott deliberately keeps his cinema “small,” as might be implied by his regular collaboration with David Nordstrom, who edited *Kid Icarus*, *LiTTLE ROCK* and *Pearblossom Hwy*, before going on to edit Adam Rifkin’s *Giuseppe Makes a Movie* (2014), a documentary about radical trailer park filmmaker Giuseppe Andrews. Like Andrews, Ott works on the margins of cinema, in a realm even where cinema stops being itself and paradoxically but necessarily becomes non-cinema—necessarily because this is not a cinema made for money nor intending to make money. Ott’s films are not amateur (and certainly not amateurish, even if they feature many non-professional actors). A non-capitalist project, Ott’s films also critique the workings of contemporary capitalism. His is non-cinema.[9]

As a possible further marker of his outsider status in contemporary U.S. cinema, we might look at how *Pearblossom Hwy* was produced and *Lake Los Angeles* executive-produced by Athina Rachel Tsangari, whose contributions to the Greek “weird wave” take the form both of her own films *Attenberg* (2010) and *Chevalier* (2015), and those of director Yorgos Lanthimos, whose *Kinetta* (2005), *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alpeis/Alps* (2011) she produced and/or associate-produced. All these films trace the underside of the European Union in crisis-hit Greece. So, too, do Ott’s film trace the underside of the United States now equally in crisis. Far from being a cinema in which hipsters seemingly never have to work, as per mumblecore and *Bellflower*, Ott’s films involve much work and/or searching for work in a bid to survive, with his characters’ dreams of and attempts at “becoming cinema” marking not so much their privilege as precisely their outsider status in relation to mainstream “cinematic” society.



A torch illuminates the otherwise invisible illegal immigrants in *Lake Los Angeles*.

If mumblecore indicates a kind of gentrification of poverty, loser-dom and hipness, its exploitative performance of poverty can ultimately be accused of complicity with rather than a critique of neoliberal capital. In contrast, Ott offers a deeper and more pointed critique of contemporary U.S. society than mumblecore does by dealing specifically in his films with film’s social role (capitalist society as cinematic) as well as by regularly investigating a more clearly lower class milieu. This is true especially in *Lake Los Angeles*, where Ott focuses on illegal immigrant workers who are otherwise “not seen” and thus usually “non-existent” to the world of cinema-capital. Outside of representation, Ott’s characters seek often-imperfect and/or quasi-obsolete ways to represent themselves, including via smartphone, VHS cameras and in writing. In fact, Ott’s characters understand the importance of and need for images, as is fitting for someone who studied under Andersen, director of *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003). Without families, Ott’s characters forge makeshift and imperfect bonds with the unlikely others whom they encounter. Without transport, they catch rides and/or move at a pedestrian rate.

Walking through the desert, characters become fused with the landscape rather than experiencing nature simply as a backdrop (perhaps fitting from a former student of James Benning, the director of numerous movies that explore relations between landscape and cinema). Being in and of the desert, Ott's characters, like his films more generally, signal the growing emptiness that surrounds cinema and capital alike, suggesting an alternative world in which alternative bonds and relationships must be made as his characters do not perform struggle but struggle to survive, even as they want impossibly to be or to become mainstream/cinematic so as not to have to struggle at all. That is, Ott reveals in his very self-consciously cinematic films that cinema itself is an illusion that allows us to pretend to escape from the desert of the real. In an era of economic and ecological crisis, in which the desert literally grows all around us, Ott's films in this sense present us not just with images of an American present that otherwise lies outside of mainstream representation, but perhaps also a vision of the United States' and the world's future.

As per most of Ott's movies, his debut *Analog Days* deals with a group of youth, here in Newhall, a town which like Littlerock, Lake Los Angeles, and Lancaster lies about thirty miles outside of Los Angeles. In Ott's words it is "not exactly a real city." [10] The main group of characters are disaffected and have no interest in politics until one of them, Tammy (Ivy Khan), begins to document with her camcorder violence towards migrants around there. If her images bring with them a sense of political awakening, it is perhaps significant that these images are digital. Gone are the "analog days" in which one dreamt that life would work out like in the movies. Here instead are the days are digital, and deeply political in nature. Ott's "small form" cinema as well is politically nuanced in its digital construction, suggesting a "minor cinema" in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's sense of the word. Within the Californian context his minor cinema traces experiences of minority populations, particularly Latinos, as he also explores in *Lake Los Angeles*. [11] Before looking in more detail at that film and the rest of Ott's *œuvre*, though, let us start with a consideration of *Kid Icarus*, Ott's often hilarious documentary about student filmmakers, who see cinema as a means of escape from their otherwise non-cinematic lives.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Kid Icarus



Leigh Harkrider receives feedback on his work from class instructor Mike Ott in *Kid Icarus*.

Ott's second feature is primarily about Leigh Harkrider, a student at the College of the Canyons, a community college in Valencia, another small town about 25 miles due north of Hollywood where Ott was teaching filmmaking. Leigh is a cocksure young man certain he'll have a glittering career in filmmaking. He's constantly referencing and borrowing production "tricks," such as drinking sparkling wine at the beginning of a shoot, from Steven Spielberg as he sets about making *Enslavence* (Leigh Harkrider, 2009)—a short film about a troubled drug addict (Crystal Rivers) who is haunted by a small boy who could be a figment of her imagination. The production faces amusing problems, including a disorganized crew, refrigerator buzzing on location, an aggrieved screenwriter seeking an authorship credit, and Leigh's generally inept social skills. In short, Leigh has no idea how to direct a film, and *Enslavence* suffers as a result. *Kid Icarus*, on the other hand, benefits enormously from these problems as it presents to us a catalog of filmmaking errors, such that we have a (problematically) comic documentary along the lines of Smith's portrait of Borchardt and his sidekick Mike Schank in *American Movie*.



Camp on camera: Cory Zacharia (right) makes his first appearance in *Kid Icarus* at The Home Depot.



Atsuko Okatsuka, production assistant, gets roped into doing the cinematography for *Enslavence* in *Kid Icarus*.



Disgruntled writer Carlo Chavez (left) and Sean Neff (right) discuss Leigh's filmmaking skills in *Kid Icarus*.



Leigh admonishes faithful boom operator Corey Rubin for not working hard enough in *Kid Icarus*.

Kid Icarus is problematic because it makes Leigh ridiculous as he fails to listen to the advice of others, including his instructor Ott, while his *Enslavence* shoot goes near-disastrously wrong (the film does get completed). As the film's title implies, Leigh suffers from his arrogance, but *Kid Icarus* is also comic and tender, partly because of the actors with whom Leigh works—several of whom have gone on to feature in Ott's subsequent films, including Cory Zacharia, a camp and exuberant



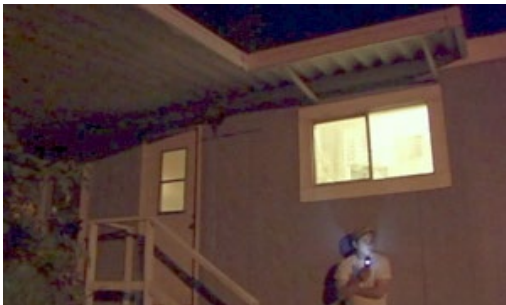
Cory awkwardly hits on Gianna in *Kid Icarus*.



Leigh in *Kid Icarus*: "I've really been much of a loner and loser for quite a bit of my life."



Leigh in *Kid Icarus* wants to be more than just "man push cart" at The Home Depot.



Leigh stands in the dark, illuminated by his cell phone, in *Kid Icarus*.

man who here develops a crush on make-up artist Gianna Luisi, and Atsuko Okatsuka, a novice cinematographer whom Leigh drafts at the last minute. Also among the film's subjects are disgruntled writer Carlo Chavez, who has the air of being permanently stoned; rejected boom operator Corey Rubin, whose fidelity to Leigh is spurned at every opportunity; and Paul Zeigler, a gruff 54-year old student who revels in telling Leigh how unprofessional he is, while at the same time smoking dope in his car during filming.

In some senses, the film might seem cruel, in that these characters often come across as stupid, as they don't pay attention and make mistakes on set, make awkward conversation (Cory hitting on Gianna, for example), or talk authoritatively about matters with which they have little familiarity (e.g., Leigh knows little to nothing about heroin culture, even though it forms a central aspect of his film). At the same, Ott and co-director Carl Bird McLaughlin allow their characters also to express insecurity. Granted, some of these insecurities come across as disingenuous, in that Leigh and Cory often revel in self-pity (Leigh: "I've really been much of a loner and loser for quite a bit of my life"; Cory: "I guess I just get overly sad, or scared or... I feel like no one really wants me, I feel just so alone and so empty all the time"). However, since such self-pity is often typical of young adults, then the intimacy that Ott achieves with his subjects leads to remarkable results as Ott's subjects open up about their own experiences, attitudes, and feelings.

For example, early on, Leigh says that "nobody wants to be nobody" as he stands in long shot on his phone in the dark outside the trailer park home where he lives. We learn later that this is his friend's mother's house. In other words, Leigh does not live with his family but in other, temporary lodging. Although he seems more invested in playing videogames and in watching *Smallville* (2001-2011) than in doing his school work, he repeatedly avows that education is important to him, since it might help him to get out of The Home Depot where he also works. In his own words: "I'm destined for greater things, I think, than pushing carts." What those "greater things" are is not certain, although Leigh does want to work in the film industry. As he says at the start of the film, in a scene that is also repeated towards the end:

"I guess I'm trying to be something that I'm not, and I can't face the fact that I'm not what I want to be. And truth is, I probably don't know what I want to be. I know I want to be a filmmaker. But I don't know what I personally want to be, like I guess I need to go on that life journey in order to find out who I really am, and, er, I guess I don't want to take that journey, I just want to get straight to it."

In other words, Leigh does not know what he wants to be, but he wants to be successful, and his understanding of success is clearly associated with cinema and/or with becoming cinematic.

As Leigh says he is scared of being "nobody," Ott and McLaughlin's documentary takes on a poetic quality. We see Leigh shrouded in darkness outside his home, speaking into the glow of his cell phone. Outside of a home that is neither his nor permanent, Leigh is threatened by the invisibility of non-existence—the darkness that surrounds him—and he uses technology, his phone, to try to connect with others. His quasi-futile desire to make films affirms that cinema is his measure of reality, and that many people do not feel that their lives are real—even in the suburbs of Hollywood itself—unless those lives are indeed cinematic. Read

psychoanalytically, Leigh's *Enslavence* expresses his own addiction—not to drugs but to media (gaming, *Smallville*), and his own desire to resist enslavement to a system that might indeed see him “pushing carts” for the rest of his life.[12] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



An overdose scene from *Enslavence*, the “bad” movie that Leigh makes in *Kid Icarus*.

Leigh wants to be cinematic, but in a manner that recalls Vilém Flusser’s idea that it is “difficult to decipher [and by extension to produce meaningful] technical images, because they are apparently in no need of being deciphered.” He does not realize that making films is not as easy as seeing films, just as making money via work is not as easy or addictive as taking on debt.[13] We could blame Leigh for being lazy; but more subtly he is symptomatic of the powerlessness and the temptation of ease that characterize the image consumer and debt. In other words, *Kid Icarus* suggests that consuming images one does not create comes from and contributes to the stranglehold that neoliberal capital has on the contemporary world via debt. Images, like debt, are all-pervasive. And not to be seen is not to exist; to be seen, or to make images, one must either be rich or one must accrue debt.

Yet, while *Enslavence* is in many respects a terrible film—partly because Leigh seeks less to make a film than to “become cinematic” (i.e. rich and famous, the object of attention)—in other respects it is important in both *Kid Icarus*’ plot and themes. Although Leigh wants *Enslavence* to be a commercial success (he regularly compares it to David Fincher’s *Fight Club*, 1999), its use in Ott’s film lies in how poorly it mimics mainstream cinema; we are asked to pay attention to precisely its imperfections. The very title of Leigh’s film, a meaningless word not in the dictionary, suggests his linguistic ineptitude. More than that, it makes mainstream cinematic language “stutter” in a manner that recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s belief in the importance of the “minor” (or what Ott terms the “small form”). That is, the very ineptitude of the title *Enslavence* subverts the unthinking logic of the major “discourse,” in which rules and correctness (having a dictionary definition) are accepted as the limits of an exclusive reality. Reality is thus aesthetic as much as it is political: only words in the dictionary are accepted as real words, just as only “good” films (with high production values) are accepted as real films, and just as only cinematic humans are accepted as real humans. But why should this be so?



Leigh copies Spielberg in cracking open sparkling wine at the commencement of the *Enslavence* shoot in *Kid Icarus*.

Clearly Leigh does not/will not become rich or famous—and indeed he tries to deprive his collaborators, especially Carlo, of any rights to any potential future success that *Enslavence* may or may not achieve. But almost in spite of himself, he makes friends where previously he had none. That is, if Leigh is someone without a family, by the end of the film he has a makeshift family that gathers and has fun at the wrap party; it’s a family forged through the very act of filmmaking itself. As Leigh himself puts it:

“I’ve really been much of a loner and loser for quite a bit of my life, and, er, this whole bunch of people, it’s like a really new experience, I mean I’ve never really had 15 people around me at one time.”

In other words, while he may not have produced a film worthy of cinema, the non-cinematic or “bad” aspects of *Enslavence*, explored in *Kid Icarus*, ironically also help to build authentic relationships. As a person, Leigh realizes that he is not a detached observer, or a consumer both of images and of other people, but an entangled participant in the world, a human being who can have friends and who thus is not alone. Perhaps his very failure to make a “real” film lets Leigh manage to create more real relationships.

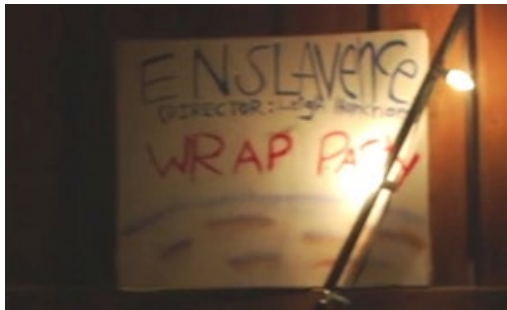
The title *Kid Icarus* refers to the Greek myth, in which Icarus flies too close to the sun, melting the wax binding together the feathers on the prosthetic wings that his father Daedalus has made, thereby causing Icarus to plunge to his death as he



Creating a new family through filmmaking: Cory does a scene with Crystal Rivers in *Enslavence*.



Mike Ott criticizes Leigh for preferring to watch *Smallville* over working in *Kid Icarus*.



New communities: the *Enslavement* wrap party in *Kid Icarus*.



Creating communities at the College of the Canyons community college where *Kid Icarus* is set.



tries to escape from Crete. The myth's implied lesson is to warn against excessive ambition. Here, I should like to challenge that reading, not least because of the addition of the word "kid" to the title. For it's normal that young people be (overly) ambitious, make mistakes, and fail; it is in sharing such experiences that real relationships are forged.

If Leigh denies his failures as a human (that to be human is to fail), then *Kid Icarus* the film conversely demonstrates that failure is okay, that it is in many respects good, and that we should not be afraid of it. In our society the cinematic is so bound up with success, that life becomes not something that one simply experiences but something that one either wins or loses. In this context, failure becomes non-cinematic but also profoundly human. While *Enslavement* might thus be rated by many as "bad" from an aesthetic perspective, *Kid Icarus* shows us how cinema can include its own rejections and failures.

A final consideration remains whether *Kid Icarus* is condescending to Leigh and thus perhaps unethical. However, while Ott personally criticizes Leigh at various points in the film, especially for not listening, *Kid Icarus* is itself a film that documents and plays a part in forming the kind of community that Leigh enjoys at his wrap party. Indeed, that Ott is Leigh's instructor suggests the beneficial role that pedagogy can play in creating communities, or ersatz families, even if this runs counter to the supposedly cinematic-capitalist ethos of individualism. With Leigh and others often hooked up to a radio mic, it is clear that he has consented to be in Ott and McLaughlin's film, and that the film is not so much detached observation as in many respects participatory and performative. Indeed, at times it seems as though the film must have been scripted, so unbelievable does it seem that someone would willingly look that silly (or like a failure) on camera. It is not the aim here to determine what is staged and what is not, but rather to argue that this very ambiguity between the two suggests an entanglement of subject and filmmaker.

The film is comic, in that one regularly laughs, but this is not a condescending laughter born out of a sense of superiority to the performers, but rather a laughter born out of a sense of kinship with the film's subjects and their frail insecurities. That is, comedy here becomes a process of reaffirming with-ness (co-medy), not condescending separation; it is part of the process of community building. Leigh is not a buffoon that we laugh at; rather we all see bits of Leigh in ourselves, and we see ourselves in Leigh. In other words, Ott and McLaughlin do not just take part in building a community that we see in the film; *Kid Icarus* itself also invites us to join the community, with film thus functioning as a means for building communities itself. This community-building is confirmed when we understand that Zacharia and Okatsuka have both gone on to star in *LITTLEROCK* and *Pearlblossom Hwy*, with Zacharia then appearing in *Lake Los Angeles* (in a brief cameo), *Lancaster, CA* and *California Dreams*, and Okatsuka co-writing *Lake Los Angeles*. In other words, Ott does not just exploit a community college for his own purposes, but is involved in the building of precisely a community, such that he has continued to work with the same people since. While Leigh compares himself to Superman, Cory wears in the film a t-shirt with the logo "I'm like a superhero with no powers or motivation."

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Cory as an anti-cinematic anti-superhero in *Kid Icarus*: Tee-shirt reads, "I'm like a superhero with no powers or motivation."



Wishing he were a cinematic superhero: Leigh, as ever, in his Superman cap in *Kid Icarus*.



Leigh's Superman-themed checkbook in *Kid Icarus*.

While Leigh learns humbly to accept his humanity (via some humiliation), perhaps it is no surprise that Zacharia's already human and specifically un-superhuman qualities make him of continuing interest to Ott in his subsequent work, as we shall now explore in relation to *LITTLEROCK*, the first in the so-called Antelope Valley trilogy.

LITTLEROCK

As mentioned, *LITTLEROCK* tells the story of a Japanese brother and sister who get stranded in the titular town, again about 40 miles north of Los Angeles. Although she does not speak English, the sister Atsuko stays on in Littlerock after her brother Rintaro has left, mainly because of her interest in Jordan, although she is clearly also the object of Cory's attention, with whom she eventually forms an unlikely friendship. Although in part about the lack of things to do in small-town California, and while referencing migrant labor, particularly through the character of kitchen worker Francisco (Roberto Sanchez), the film also culminates in a visit by Rintaro and Atsuko (now reunited) to the Manzanar Internment Camp, where the US government held captive roughly 110,000 Japanese-Americans during World War Two. Using non-professional actors and made on a budget that Mike Hale of *The New York Times* describes as "out of pocket," *LITTLEROCK* is concerned with conveying a history of California that is seldom repeated and a present of California that lies beyond the typical purview of cinema.[14]



East meets West: Japanese visitors Atsuko and Rintaro enter a "Western" shop upon arriving in Littlerock.



Empathizing with the Native American: Atsuko and Rintaro learn about the USA's Indian population as well as their grandfather's internment at Manzanar in *LITTLEROCK*.



Small-town California: first impressions of Littlerock.



Cory introduces Rintaro to the joys of shotgunning beer in *LITTLEROCK*.



An ironic homage to the Lumières: a train bypasses Littlerock – much like cinema does.



Cory explains to Atsuko his ambition to make himself more visible in *LITTLEROCK*.

After initial shots of passing desert landscape, the film opens with Atsuko and Rintaro getting off a bus and wondering whether they are in the right place, perhaps because where they are does not seem to be a place at all. As Atsuko explains in a voice over that narrates a letter written to her father, their car has broken down and they need to wait two days for it to be repaired. They visit a shop where they look at photos/postcards featuring Native Americans and Wild West trinkets, before checking into a motel, where, unable to sleep, first Rintaro and then Atsuko join a party taking place next door. Here they meet Cory, who welcomes them and who introduces them to “American” rituals such as shotgunning cans of beer, as well as to his friends, including Sean Tippy, whom viewers of *Kid Icarus* may recognize as Sean Neff from that film. The next day, Cory takes Atsuko and Rintaro to the Devil’s Punchbowl, a sandstone formation on the edge of the Angeles National Forest, where he explains that his mother is dead, before we then see them hanging out by the railroad. A freight train passes before Cory explains that he wants to be a model and an actor, performing a would-be runway walk as he does so.


The latter moment is important for a couple of reasons. In showing us the passing train, the scene recalls the Lumière brothers’ first film, *Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat/Arrival of the Train* (1896). Except that where the Lumières’ train stops and we see passengers disembarking, here the train just passes by. In other words, if the train signals cinema, this sequence suggests that cinema has bypassed Littlerock and Cory alike. Being outside of cinema or invisible, and also without a complete family, Cory here announces that he wants to be visible as a model or an actor, i.e. that he aspires to be cinematic. His failure to be so, however, is compounded in the next scene when we discover that Cory owes money to Brody, i.e. Cory is broke, with Brody, Garbo and Marques also marking Cory as outside of mainstream society by bullying him for being gay (even though Cory claims that he is not). Cory’s humiliation is finalized as it is here that Atsuko also meets Jordan, with the two demonstrating a mutual interest in each other.



Cory shows his model face in *LITTLEROCK*.



Atsuko, Cory and Jordan head out to the desert on hipster bikes in *LITTLEROCK*.

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| Jordan, with his hipster satchel, flirts with Atsuko in <i>LITTLEROCK</i> . | Taken in by the hipster charm: Atsuko listens to Jordan's retro "Limerence" cassette tape in <i>LITTLEROCK</i> . |



Unable to afford a bike for practical, let alone ironic purposes, Cory introduces Atsuko and Rintaro to his pedestrian life in *LITTLEROCK*.

That night, Jordan hits on Atsuko at a party by Garbo's trailer, which abuts a military weapons range, as Brody hassles Cory once again for not paying back his money. Jordan invites Atsuko, who only speaks Japanese, for a bike ride, with Cory joining them the next day as they head out to the desert and drink by an abandoned shack. Atsuko goes through Jordan's satchel and begins to listen to a cassette that he has made entitled "Limerence," before Cory leaves them together because of a shift that he must work at his father's diner. In other words, Jordan seduces Atsuko through his hipster style (his easy good looks and brush-over hair, the satchel, the cassette tape and the bikes), while Cory cannot form such a "cinematic" relationship because he is in debt to Brody and because, unlike Jordan, he must work. If Atsuko, unlike Rintaro who claims not to trust their new friends, is taken in by the charm of the seemingly free-flowing alcohol and ukulele songs performed around an open fire at Garbo's party, Cory is not really part of this world. If Atsuko and Rintaro are passing through, like the train and also like Jordan and his mobile friends (Jordan is planning on going to New York; Brody, Garbo and Marques, meanwhile, drive around in a car), then Cory is not—and notably it is by foot and not by "vintage" bike (with obligatory "chopper" handlebars) that he shows his Japanese guests around.

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JUMP CUT

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Microwave dinners: Atsuko samples "real" American cuisine at Cory's house in *LITTLEROCK*.



Learning what lies beyond the hipster: Atsuko meets Francisco at Cory's dad's diner in *LITTLEROCK*.

Hipsterism is thus revealed to be a form of cultural tourism, a chosen and empowered lifestyle as opposed to one that is the result of necessity. Less overtly masculine than the heteronormative style of Brody and friends (who also hurl racist abuse at Francisco from their car at one point), Jordan's hipster style may be charming, but it is also revealed ultimately as shallow and exploitative. Atsuko discovers as much when towards the film's end she spies Jordan cheating on her. But what Atsuko truly learns is a more profound truth than even this. When she decides to stay, it is Cory who takes Atsuko in. Living with Cory and his father (Ivor Falk) is hardly glamorous, as Atsuko is invited to share microwave meals from a plastic tray and also starts doing shifts in the diner run by Cory's father, where she meets Francisco. However, it is perhaps through this brief spell of work and an understanding of Cory and Francisco's relative poverty that Atsuko is able in some senses to understand her own family history, as expressed through the visit to Manzanar.

For as one passes through a landscape, one does not really get to know it. It is only through stasis that the real landscape reveals itself. That is, Jordan and Brody's male privilege and empowerment to travel is built upon Francisco's work, and in some ways on Cory's (try as Cory might to escape work and to become a model, an actor and a poet). More than this, it is only through acknowledging the eradication of the Native American population, alluded to in the trinket shop at the film's opening, and the internment of the Japanese POWs that we can similarly begin to understand the basis of U.S. power. The ruined building, desert and military range all signal the history of violence upon which this nation is based and the ongoing necessity for that violence in order for the national landscape as cinematic image to be maintained. Passing through the landscape, one will not see this, experiencing instead a romantic attachment akin to limerence.



The remnants of violence: dilapidated buildings in the desert in *LITTLEROCK*.



An ongoing military presence: Garbo's place next to a USAF bombing and artillery range in *LITTLEROCK*.



The Manzanar War Relocation Center in *LITTLEROCK*.



Learning history by stopping to look at the landscape: Atsuko and Rintaro visit where their grandfather was interned during WW2

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| | in <i>LITTLE ROCK</i> . |

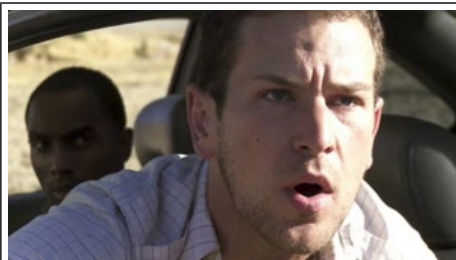
But a real relationship that is more reliable than limerence must involve seeing past the hipster façade and understanding that Cory and Francisco are in effect the new population interned in the desert, which Atsuko learns by sharing their lifestyle. Stuck there rather than passing through, Cory and Francisco live in a way that contrasts with Jordan and his friends’ lives. Experiencing this, rather than herself simply passing through, is what allows Atsuko more profoundly to understand her own family history, even if it lies outside of cinema because cinema itself involves a logic not of stasis but of empowered movement as images constantly pass through the projector.



A curator is not particularly impressed by Cory's video-poem in *LITTLE ROCK*.

Cory produces an experimental video on VHS—not as a hipster move but as expression through the only medium that he has at his disposal. In it he asks, “What am I supposed to do now? What am I supposed to be? Am I not a poet?” From the perspective of cinema, Cory is not a poet. Or if he is a poet, he is a “bad” one, as implied by the pained look that a curator offers as he watches the video when Cory submits it for an upcoming show at a local gallery. But like Leigh as a filmmaker in *Kid Icarus*, Ott suggests that Cory in some senses is a poet, especially when his video is accepted into the show and shown at the gallery. He is not in Los Angeles as per his wishes, but he nonetheless is an artist in a small way, and perhaps a better artist for it.

For just as Jordan cheats and Brody, Garbo and Marques are racists, mainstream society is revealed as exploitative and violent. Cory, meanwhile, finds himself part of a small community that in some sense is bound together by Atsuko as she discovers his worth.

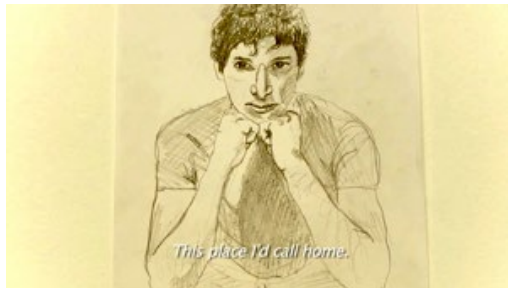


Small-town racism: Brody hurls abuse at



Despite being subjected to Brody's verbal

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| Francisco from his car in <i>LITTLE ROCK</i> . | assaults, Francisco becomes part of a band of outsiders in <i>LITTLE ROCK</i> . |



He really could be a model: Atsuko's portrait of Cory, entitled "Little Rock."



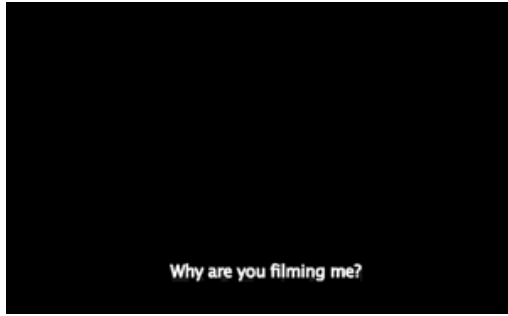
Anna works as a prostitute to raise money to get home – even though she is supposed to be applying for U.S. citizenship – in *Pearblossom Hwy*.

For Atsuko also has work accepted into the exhibition, in particular a portrait of Cory that bears the title "Littlerock." "Damn, I really could be a model," says Cory as he observes the drawing, hope restored to his life through art, even if only in a small way. And even though Cory argues with Francisco, who mocks Cory for seeming gay, Atsuko also draws Francisco into this community when she leaves him a necklace that she buys in the trinket store that we saw at the film's opening. Even though neither Cory nor Atsuko nor Francisco (who speaks only Spanish) have a common language, they are bound together by stasis, which in turn ties them to the landscape, which in turn gives them a deeper understanding of history and the true, violent basis of the United States, which is linked to the performance of hipster and macho masculinities. Imperfect (not the least because Cory struggles to get on with black people, who are absent from the film except in the form of the bully Marques), nonetheless a tentative if "uncinematic" community is found on the margins of the mainstream. Perhaps this community is more meaningful than a romantic relationship founded on limerence. In this way, Cory and Atsuko do not fall in love before the desert landscape but at least become friends. One might read the final moments of the film, in which Atsuko and Cory speak on the phone without understanding each other (Atsuko says in Japanese that Cory is a good person while Cory describes Atsuko as his only friend) as a sign of failure or a lack of connection. But in fact both characters—talking not on smartphones but using a landline—have bonded, not in spite of but perhaps *because* of that failure.

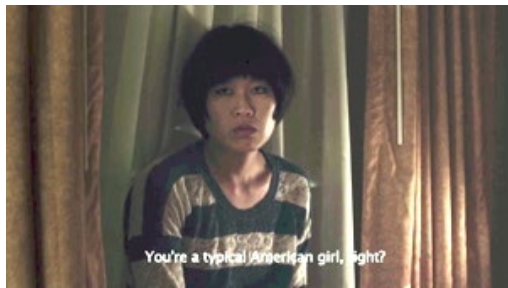
Pearblossom Hwy

Named after the main road that passes through Littlerock and Lancaster, the town in which it is set, *Pearblossom Hwy* explores various issues that build upon the situation depicted in *LITTLE ROCK*. Okatsuka this time plays Anna, not a tourist but a Japanese student who turns to prostitution in order to make enough money to visit her dying grandmother in her homeland. Zacharia again plays Cory, who in this film is in a punk band called Cory and the Corrupts, and who dreams of being on a reality television show. Cory has an uneasy relationship with his former Marine brother, Jeff. Jeff comes home to hang out with Cory before they decide to travel to San Francisco both for a visit to the grave of their dead mother and for Cory to meet for the first time his otherwise absent father, Rick (Stephen Tobolowsky), who rejects him.

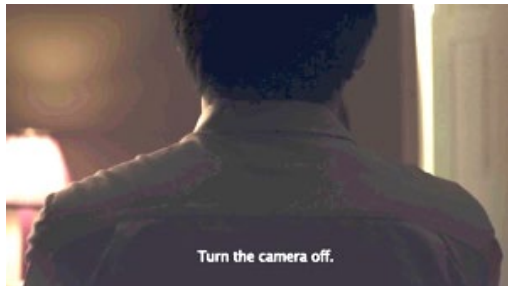
In other words, the journey into the past is this time not Anna's but Cory's, as Cory, Jeff and Anna form another unlikely and makeshift community/family. While exploring similar themes to *LITTLE ROCK*, however, *Pearblossom Hwy* is



A black screen as a Japanese man films Anna, commodifying her as an image, in *Pearblossom Hwy*.



In being a prostitute, Anna becomes a “typical American girl” in *Pearblossom Hwy*.



In rejecting America, Anna also rejects being an image in *Pearblossom Hwy*.



in some respects a darker and more violent film than its predecessor. This is also made clear by Ott’s signally more aggressive editing style, which regularly employs Jean-Luc Godard-style gunshot sounds to accompany cuts and rapid montages. If in the earlier film Jordan’s exploitation of Atsuko demonstrates a continuation of the U.S. imperialist exploitation of others, as per the exclusion of Japanese-American citizens via internment at Manzanar, here sexual relations no longer enjoy the veneer of romance via limerence but instead are uniquely transactional and violent. That Anna is a student working as a prostitute and hoping to travel suggests that love has been corrupted, with education no longer contributing to community building but instead necessitating entry into capital simultaneously via prostitution and becoming cinema—with all three being linked figuratively in the sense that prostitution involves woman as an image to make money (as opposed to a human being whom a man might desire), and in the literal sense that one of Anna’s regular clients, also a Japanese man (played again by Rintaro Sawamoto), films his encounters with her. The character’s situation is also linked to transportation and the infrastructure of the country as Anna on various occasions goes looking for clients at truck stops. If Jordan’s ability to travel is in *LiTTLE ROCK* linked to his exploitative take on relationships, here the enabling infrastructure of the country (transport networks bringing us commodities) is also tied to sexual exploitation.

Furthermore, if the presence of the military range in *LiTTLE ROCK* is suggestive of how the country is built upon violence, so is Jeff’s work as a marine. Indeed, soon after returning, Jeff chastizes Cory for not having a job, describing his own military experiences as “shitty” and saying that he was protecting Cory’s “right not to do shit.” In other words, Jeff feels exploited as a result of his immediate impression that Cory is wasting his life with a relatively talentless if energetic punk band, one that no doubt irks Jeff when Cory sings lines like “I will not conform to this fucking country”—as if his work for the marines were a waste of time.

However, as Atsuko learns kinship with Cory and Francisco in the earlier film, so Jeff learns kinship with his brother in *Pearblossom Hwy*. In one scene, Jeff steps outside a Lancaster dive bar for a smoke and looks around: “Man, there’s nothing here,” he says, signalling his burgeoning understanding of Cory’s situation, that Cory is not so much wasting his life and exploiting the efforts of the military as Cory has no life in Lancaster to waste. Indeed, given his work with the band, Cory is in some senses creatively engaging with the lack of opportunities in Lancaster, where a refusal to conform does not mean rejecting work but making art where there is no work. By this rationale, Cory was not just irrational when he lost his driver’s license with a DUI, rendering him immobile; that act was also the logical extension of a total lack of mobility where he lives.

In what can perhaps be read as a continuation of his video art piece in *LiTTLE ROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy* opens with Cory recording himself on what appears to be a smartphone (“I really wish sometimes I were a better person”). He’s also aspiring to get on television. However, although he hopes to be or to become cinematic, he’s frustrated in his efforts. This is made especially clear when Cory gets to San Francisco.



American infrastructure and the movement of commodities that include humans: the truck stop functions as a space where Anna finds work in *Pearblossom Hwy*.

Non-cinematic glitches undermine Cory's bid to make it on to a reality TV show in *Pearblossom Hwy*.



Escaping the desert: Anna, Cory and Jeff hit the road in *Pearblossom Hwy*.



Jeff drives Cory and Anna to San Francisco in *Pearblossom Hwy*.

Unlike the desert, the city is a place of cinema: Cory watches a movie in San Francisco in *Pearblossom Hwy*.



The Kid: Chaplin's screen tramp mirrors Cory's own aspirations to transcend poverty and to become cinematic in *Pearblossom Hwy*.

Fantasy San Francisco: Cory and Anna wander in *Pearblossom Hwy* through an abandoned graffiti zone even in the city.



Cory leaves his modest mark on San Francisco in *Pearblossom Hwy*.

"What do you do [in Lancaster, CA] if there's anything besides trying not to kill yourself?" A comedienne mocks Cory and desert life in *Pearblossom Hwy*.



There, one sequence shows Cory and Anna going on an almost impossible tour around the city, travelling in only a few minutes of screen time from one end of San Francisco to the other, taking in cliff-top vistas, a record store, a flea market, a bus ride, a trip to the movies (to see what looks like Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid*, 1921) and to see the architecture of a city that is the setting for Alfred Hitchcock's most celebrated rumination on cinema and desire, *Vertigo* (1958). In other words, San Francisco becomes a kind of cinematic fantasy space for Cory, replete with a derelict area covered in graffiti where he and Anna hang out briefly, thereby demonstrating the city's "alternative" credentials. Having finally become cinema/cinematic in the city, though, the illusion does not last. We see Cory picked on by a stand-up comedienne (Shawn Pelofsky), who mocks him for his band, his TV aspirations, and for claiming that Lancaster lies in Los Angeles. Cory really did know that Lancaster could not be further from LA, in many ways. But his claim that they are the same place was based more upon his desire for this to be so rather than physical reality. The comedienne continues by asking Cory what he does in Lancaster—"if there's anything besides trying not to kill yourself." And with this question, the comedienne casts Cory out of his cinematic San Francisco

A guy hits on Cory in a San Francisco pub in *Pearblossom Hwy.*



Jeff confronts Cory for being a “faggot” in *Pearblossom Hwy.*



Jeff, Cory and Anna visit the grave of Cory’s mother in *Pearblossom Hwy.*

moment and back into his uncinemematic life.

Rather than abandon his brother, Jeff learns instead to understand and by extension to love him. Nonetheless, he objects violently to Cory’s making an impression as a “faggot,” dragging him from a bar where another guy (Ryan Dillon) seems to be trying to pick Cory up shortly after the stand-up show.[15] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) If homosexuality remains another form of “right not to do shit,” though, Jeff again comes to realize that Cory is a man who has grown up without a father. As Cory himself asks:

“How do you act straight? How do you act gay? How do you act like a girl? How do you act like a guy? How do you act like a man? How do you act like a man when there’s not a man around?”

Without a model to follow, it is not that Cory is straight or gay; he is, rather, himself. And if in his lack of performance, Cory is revealed as uncinemematic and by extension incomprehensible to others, including his brother who has defended the cinematic values of the nation by serving in the military, then Cory is equally freed from cinematic illusions. As Jeff himself admits to Anna:

“Cory should be happy that he [Rick] wants nothing to do with him. He’s a shit for a dad.”

Here we have a linguistic link between the “shitty” military, a “shit” father and Cory’s inability to “do shit” (thereby revealing that the mainstream cinematic society that Cory cannot join is, precisely, shit!). We also see Jeff acknowledging Cory’s freedom. Rick briefly performs fatherhood for Cory, telling him a bad joke about a guy who wastes a second wish from a leprechaun by asking for a second, self-refilling cup of beer. Cory then repeats the joke as he, Jeff and Anna drive back from San Francisco to Lancaster—except that Cory botches the re-telling. Having been shown by his so-called father how to act like a man, Cory in some senses refuses to do so, not least because meeting his father, contrary to expectations, “really wasn’t that interesting.” In other words, Cory does not and cannot perform a cinematic masculinity. Indeed, he is in many ways not a performer and in this way eludes cinema.



Cory awaits his first meeting with his father in *Pearblossom Hwy.*



Cory wanders with his father outside his trailer home in *Pearblossom Hwy.*



Failing to perform: the film switches from an interview with Cory Lawler the character to Cory Zacharia the actor in *Pearblossom Hwy.*



An Edward Hopper-esque image suggests a makeshift family holding out against the darkness in *Pearblossom Hwy.*

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And it is precisely at this moment that Ott's film transitions into an interview not with Cory the character, but with Cory the actor, whom Ott asks in voice off not about Cory's "dad in the movie," but his "dad in real life." Cory replies by explaining how his father cooks meth and does not acknowledge Cory as his son, about which Cory is not unhappy, "because I don't feel like he's my dad." Bereft of a father and failing to perform, Cory is outside of cinema, perhaps even the social real. But while he fails to perform, Cory also performs failure, and in the process brings to cinema its outside. This outside is paradoxically cinematic and uncinematic at the same time, a non-cinematic real upon which cinema is built, much like the invisible labor upon which the nation is built. If the traditional family is also erected upon violence and exclusion, then it is in his new, makeshift family/community with Anna and Jeff that Cory will survive. Jeff learns not that Cory is exploiting him but that Cory and Anna both are exploited like him for the purposes of constructing a cinematic nation. And if the nation as cinema is built upon violence, then Ott's repeated gunshot cuts remind us of the violence of cinema itself, reminding us constantly that we are watching a film rather than allowing us to slip into a comfortable viewing position from which the violence of cinema is occluded.

Lake Los Angeles



Outside of mainstream society: Roberto Sanchez plays former marine Alejandro Fumero in *Pearblossom Hwy*.

On their way to San Francisco, Cory, Jeff and Anna stop at the house of Jeff's fellow former marine, Alejandro Fumero (Roberto Sanchez). Alejandro explains that since his return from the military, he has been having a hard time getting a job, taking up odd jobs as a painter rather than finding regular work. In other words, like Cory, Alejandro lives outside mainstream society. However, when Alejandro and Anna later smoke a cigarette together outside his house, Anna explains that she is thinking about skipping her citizenship exam and instead using the money to travel back to Japan. Anna's possible status as an American is linked to prostitution, and Alejandro's status as an American is equally linked to his time in the military. That is, both learn that to be an American is to be exploited, with prostitution and the military in effect being parallel careers. Alejandro explains that he arrived in the United States from Cuba as part of Operation Peter Pan, in which 14,000 Cuban children were flown here between 1960 and 1962 presumably to help families seeking to leave Fidel Castro's newly-



Roberto Sanchez as Francisco in *Lake Los Angeles*.

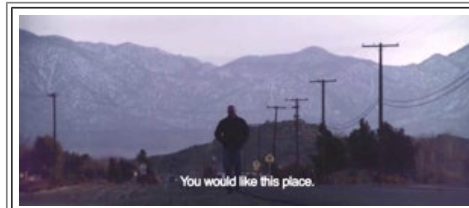


An outsider to the USA: Cecilia's first impression of *Lake Los Angeles*.

established Communist country. “This country [the USA] has given me everything,” says Alejandro, before explaining how his mother sacrificed “everything for me to be here”—even though he never saw her again. Without a family, Alejandro has nonetheless found life in this country, and while he may be exploited, he is nonetheless more “cinematic” here than he would be in Cuba.

Pearblossom Hwy does not criticize Alejandro for loving his adopted nation, but his inability to escape precarity in his post-military life would suggest that he’s not been fully incorporated into or cared for within U.S. society (perhaps because the American system is founded upon a lack of care for its citizens as well as upon the military and violence). But while Alejandro has achieved some integration as a result of his military experience, the same is not true of Francisco in *Lake Los Angeles*, where Sanchez once again plays a Cuban illegal immigrant called Francisco, as per his role in *LITTLEROCK*.

Lake Los Angeles is the most overtly political of the Antelope Valley trilogy in terms of its storyline. It depicts the parallel and briefly overlapping lives of Francisco, who makes a living taking odd jobs and by looking after a holding house for other immigrants trafficked into California from across the Mexican border, and Cecilia (Johanna Trujillo), a 10-year old Mexican girl who arrives in Lake Los Angeles without a family. On the verge of being sold into sexual slavery, Cecilia escapes into the desert. The film then follows the way in which the American dream proves to be nothing other than a dream for both Francisco and Cecilia in their respective lives—until they reunite at the film’s end. In particular, *Lake Los Angeles* makes use of haunting desert imagery in order to convey how its geographical setting is nothing like Los Angeles, nor even a lake anymore.



At a pedestrian pace: Francisco narrates a letter to his wife as he wanders the desert on foot in *Lake Los Angeles*.



The haunting desert: Cecilia wanders along the desert roads on foot in *Lake Los Angeles*.





Indeed, at a time when California is undergoing severe water shortages, *Lake Los Angeles* seems to express the hidden desertification of the area, which runs counter to the image of an opulent LA that we see in more mainstream films. Indeed, the lack of water seems directly linked to Francisco’s lack of work opportunities; the literal drought is accompanied by an economic drought, and the desert emerges therefore as not just a feature of geology but also of socioeconomics.



Aeroplanes carry the mobile and wealthy over *Lake Los Angeles*.

Aeroplanes fly far overhead as Cecilia wanders the desert, reminding us of how tourists and the rich easily travel internationally in an era when the poor conversely struggle to move across borders, especially into the United States and what is regularly referred to as Fortress Europe. To a seemingly greater extent than in his other films, here Ott develops a more expressive cinematographic style. As Cecilia and Francisco both are shown repeatedly walking through and contemplating the desert, we begin to see them not so much “against” the desert as a backdrop, as with or part of the desert. In particular, the film focuses on trees growing in the desert, with Cecilia drawing and using as a geographical marker one particular tree that helps her to find her way back to Francisco. Thus it is not that these *chicano* characters are “like the desert,” but perhaps are much like these trees—somehow defiantly growing out of and fused with this otherwise supposedly barren land. Wind turbines suggesting the air, open fires, the desert

earth, and a special emphasis on Cecilia finding water lend to the film an elemental dimension, already there in the other films, more pronounced here.

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| The cactus that guides Cecilia back to Francisco in <i>Lake Los Angeles</i> . | Wind turbines mark the potential energy of the desert in <i>Lake Los Angeles</i> . |
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| Water remains a rare element in the Lake Los Angeles area. | Cecilia steals water from a tap in <i>Lake Los Angeles</i> . |

Bearing in mind a history of Chicano cinema, in which the U.S. Latino population, both legal and not, has been represented and has represented itself, the fusing of these Hispanic characters with the elements, with the desert and with nature potentially runs the risk of “essentializing” them.[16] For example, consider the role of animals in the film. *Lake Los Angeles* opens with an image of a foggy desert road illuminated by advancing car headlights as Cecilia recounts in voice over a story in which a lost man who is tired and hungry finds a rabbit that offers itself to him as food. In return for this favor, the man carves the image of the rabbit into the moon so that they remain always together. Meanwhile, Francisco describes himself as looking after wounded animals, while Cecilia also finds and regularly brings food to a dog that she calls Panchito. Such moments lend a potentially problematic component of mythologizing to Ott’s film, in that it seems to connect “natural” and “honest” Hispanic characters with the non-human world of animals and the landscape.



Cecilia gives water to Panchito in *Lake Los Angeles*.

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| The moon, where an image of a rabbit is carved to remind humans of their sacrifice to them as food, in <i>Lake Los Angeles</i> . | Francisco alludes to his hand in human trafficking before an open fire in <i>Lake Los Angeles</i> . |

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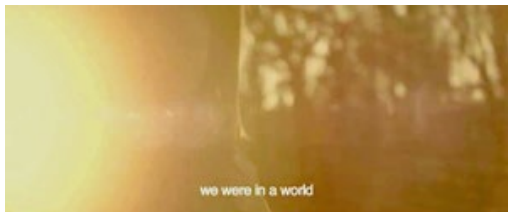
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A homeless person sleeps in an abandoned shack in the desert in *Lake Los Angeles*.



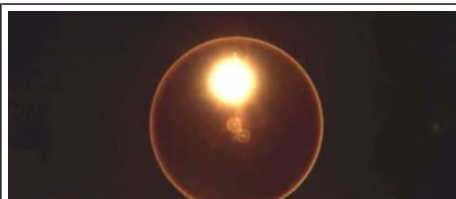
Her own Rosebud: Cecilia contemplates the snow globe that she talks to throughout *Lake Los Angeles*.



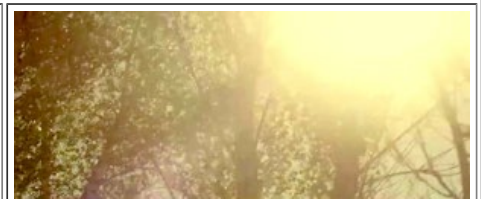
Self-conscious images: lens flare practically obscures Francisco from view in *Lake Los Angeles*.

However, the almost exclusively Hispanic population of *Lake Los Angeles* also includes Adria (Eloy Méndez), who carries out the trafficking runs, and a store worker (Corina Calderon) who threatens to report Cecilia for shoplifting. That is, *Lake Los Angeles* is not one-dimensional in its portrayal of Hispanic characters, but instead shows a range of different characters, with Adria leading Francisco on a failed attempt to steal some money from others in the trafficking network. Remarkable for being almost entirely in Spanish, even if *Lake Los Angeles* notably involves much less talking than the other films in the Antelope Valley trilogy (Cory talks almost incessantly), the “fusion” of Cecilia and Francisco (rather than all Hispanics) with the landscape serves to highlight once again the way in which the nation is based upon the contributions of these characters. In other words, they learn to become part of the land rather than “naturally” take up this role, and this comes about because of their exclusion from mainstream society (the United States is built upon exploitation; in being exploited, they see the “real” America). And in this, they are not alone as Cecilia encounters a white homeless man who also wanders the desert—even if the homeless man never specifically sees Cecilia and even if they never talk. The implied kinship demonstrated between Cecilia, Francisco, the homeless man, the animals and the desert instead conveys something far more functional and less mythic/romantic. That is, as they need fire for warmth and water to drink, so too do they “merge” with their surroundings in order to survive in them, developing whatever relationships they can for this purpose. It is not that stoically they suffer in silence; there literally is no one for these characters to talk with. Indeed, shy of an interlocutor, Cecilia instead talks to the *viejito*/old man that lives inside a snow globe that she has brought with her from south of the border. While the snow globe functions metaphorically in the film on more than one level, as I shall discuss below, for her to invest it with an ability to listen and to hear is not simply her childish fetishization as it is a mechanism for coping with solitude.

The film’s cinematography repeatedly features lens flare, in particular in shots featuring Cecilia and Francisco. The effect of the lens flare is that not only are Cecilia and Francisco “fused” with the landscape, but that the status of this “fusion” is consciously acknowledged *as an image*. The lens flare by extension also “fuses” the viewer with the image, in that the viewer cannot simply observe these characters in a detached fashion but is implicated in the filmmaking process by virtue of this self-conscious artefact. Such cinematography gives a sense of Francisco and Cecilia as constructed images (the lens flare makes the presence of the camera visible) but it does not necessarily render them “cinematic,” such that they are included in society. For rather than allowing us to see these characters, the lens flare also partially *obscures* and renders invisible that which features in the frame (it is the lens flare itself that dominates the frame). This means that the lives of people like Cecilia and Francisco are partially and paradoxically obscured by light, suggesting that they are invisible to mainstream society.



An extreme and beautiful lens flare



Lake Los Angeles ends with a shot of lens

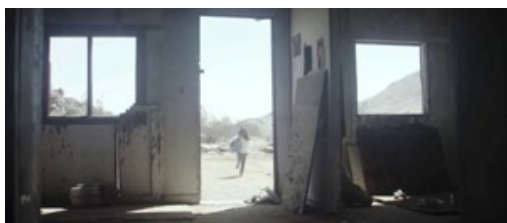
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| moment in <i>Lake Los Angeles</i> . | flare against trees in the desert. |



Almost entirely alone in the desert: Cecilia in her abandoned desert shack in *Lake Los Angeles*.



Cecilia in *Lake Los Angeles* steps from the shack like Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*.



A second *Searchers*-style shot in *Lake Los Angeles* sees Cecilia choose to remain in the desert by heading to find Francisco.

And yet, via their respective journeys from Cuba and Mexico, Francisco and Cecilia alike seek a more cinematic life, as is made clear by the film's intertextual references. That Cecilia talks to a snow globe can only bring to mind *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), in which a snow globe functions as a reminder for Charles Foster Kane (Welles) of his childhood in the Colorado mountains. As in *Kane*, the snow globe represents an impossible and lost past, namely Cecilia's life with her parents, from whom she has been separated and who will not join her in the USA, in spite of their promise to do so. Where in *Kane*, the snow globe smashes as Kane drops it on the point of death while uttering the famous word "Rosebud," in *Lake Los Angeles* the snow globe is smashed when unknown people enter into and spend time in the dilapidated desert shack where Cecilia hides. If the smashing of the snow globe marks Kane's death, Cecilia lives on—but perhaps only because as an illegal immigrant she is in some senses "already dead" (or non-existent, because invisible) within the United States. Although Kane and Cecilia share a separation from their family, their destinies are completely different.

The irony of this shared cinematic destiny is suggested through another intertextual reference—to John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). In that film, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) is famously seen through a doorframe stepping out into the desert after having rescued his niece (Natalie Wood) from the Comanche. An iconic image, it also marks Edwards' obsolescence in the West; violent and racist figures like him might be necessary for getting done the job of creating the (imperialist) nation, but they are soon discarded once more genteel lives can be led. In *Lake Los Angeles*, meanwhile, Cecilia steps out into the desert from a dilapidated shack. The desert here is not conquered, but rather has reclaimed the old homestead. The reference to *The Searchers* might once again suggest that Cecilia has become cinematic. But in "fusing" with the desert as opposed to conquering it, the shot also suggests Cecilia's ongoing outsider status. In this respect she perhaps is like Edwards. As Edwards through his violence helps to establish the country, only to be rejected from it because of his violent ways, so is Cecilia and the rest of the Hispanic immigrant workforce essential to the running of the country, even if she and that workforce more generally are summarily excluded from the nation as they are excluded from its cinema.

Cecilia is without a family—as suggested by a third intertextual reference, which is the repeated use of Jeanette's 1974 song, "¿Por qué te vas?," which also is played repeatedly in *Cría cuervos/Raise Ravens* (1976), Carlos Saura's film about a young girl (Ana Torrent) whose parents are both dead. Perhaps the presence of Jeanette's song on the film's soundtrack suggests that Cecilia's parents have met a similar fate.[17] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Meanwhile, Francisco is also without family, receiving a letter towards the end of *Lake Los Angeles*, in which his wife Claudia (Laimarie Serrano) breaks off her relationship with him. Writing letters (as opposed to emails) and listening to vinyl records (as opposed to digital listening), Francisco is not using old media because he is a hipster, but because he



Actor Martinez opens with an image card – suggesting that the film will include what other films leave out because it is deemed non-cinematic.



Mike, Arthur and Nathan discuss their film project in *Actor Martinez*. Note the hipster drinking jars.



Having “a name”: Arthur meets Lindsay Burdge for the first time to discuss *Actor Martinez*.

does not fit into the contemporary world. Nonetheless, he does forge a new family of sorts via his kinship with Cecilia, who at the film’s end arrives at his house having survived her time in the desert. Notably, as Atsuko presents Francisco with a necklace in *LiTTLE ROCK*, so does Cecilia do the same with Francisco here, thereby confirming their new if unconventional bond.

Actor Martinez

Ott’s next film saw him move to Denver to work with Nathan Silver on this complex movie that nonetheless is also an investigation into cinema and the cinematic. As mentioned earlier, Arthur is an actor, but he makes ends meet by working as a computer repairman. He drinks heavily and is almost constantly stoned. *Actor Martinez* opens with a long take, mainly out of focus, in which Mike and Nathan discuss their notes about how to work with Arthur for the film. From the outset then, the film is self-consciously about making a film, as repeatedly we see the directors and the actors sat drinking (from “hipster” jars) at a table discussing their thoughts on what seem to be that day’s rushes. At one point, the film continues across takes as Arthur breaks character at the end of one take, only to go back into character in the new take. In other words, *Actor Martinez* does not hide the artifice that goes into its own making but rather wholly embraces it.

As discussed, if cinema involves the occultation of its own making, then in some senses *Actor Martinez* is not cinema. And yet, like Leigh in *Kid Icarus*, Arthur’s desire to be an actor is driven by his desire for visibility and thus his desire for empowerment within a capitalist and cinematic society. The importance of visibility is made clear when Arthur discusses his preference for Lindsay Burdge as his co-star because she is “a name” (i.e. has appeared in films before) and thus adds “marketability” to the film (not that directors Mike and Nathan want this). [18] Furthermore, the “cinematic” nature of contemporary U.S. society is also suggested when Arthur and Kenneth (Kenneth Berba) use their acting skills to train police officers; the law itself is a performance as much as anything else.

That said, while *Actor Martinez* explores the aspiration to be or become cinematic, it also firmly takes place within an increasingly digital world, where cinema is perhaps anachronistic. Arthur enters into people’s homes to repair their computers; on various occasions we also see the inhabitants of those homes either watching television or, more pointedly, playing videogames. Arthur is invisible to these people—he’s not a human being to them but a service provider. The digital age here consists of people who do not communicate or form communities; instead they exist in an isolated state sold to them. As a “new” medium, the computer nonetheless shares various characteristics with cinema, including the making-invisible of its inner workings. Most (relatively well off) users of computers do not know—nor do they seemingly want to know—how those computers function; their workings, like the workings of capital and of cinema alike, are thus (wilfully) invisible to us. For this reason, Arthur is ignored by those whom he visits: they do not want to see work being carried out, nor to pay attention to the fact that before them a Latino is making possible their participation in digital-era capitalist society. Perhaps it is not surprising that Arthur also begins to refer to himself as if he were a computer, suggesting that he needs a “reboot” (a term that has of course been co-opted by the movie industry to refer to the recycling of pre-existing cinematic material).

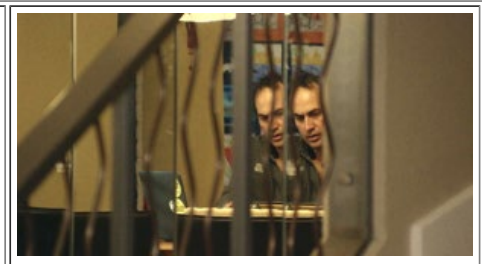
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All of life is a performance in the cinematic society: Arthur and Kenneth use their acting skills to train cops and, in this scene, ambulance paramedics in *Actor Martinez*.



Consuming media, ignoring immigrants: a client plays videogames as Arthur fixes their home computer in *Actor Martinez*.



Multiplied by reflective surfaces: will the real Arthur Martinez please stand up?

In seeking to become cinematic, though, Arthur as a human being paradoxically disappears from view during the course of this film named for him. Who is Arthur Martinez? And why has he been replaced by *Actor Martinez*? Constantly *Actor Martinez* shows us Arthur framed in mirrors and other reflective surfaces. To become an image/to become cinematic may grant entry into capitalist society (to be visible connotes success and wealth as attention is economized), and yet Arthur “himself” disappears from view.

The film takes on at its core the directors’ desire to get Arthur to cry. They plan a re-enactment of him ending his relationship with Lindsay—evoking memories of his supposedly real split from his wife before the film begins. The directors do not succeed, with Lindsay even improvising at one point (or so it seems) to say that Arthur (the actor or the character?) never really shows any emotions but is/was always performing. Like a machine, she says, Arthur cannot cry—and his failing is dressed up specifically in the language of performative patriarchy as Arthur declares that “it is not a guy’s role to cry.” Like an empty image, Arthur cannot reveal anything real—with Mike also accusing Arthur of never saying anything that has any meaning. If *Pearlblossom Hwy* ends with Cory failing to perform and thus taking us outside of acting, outside of cinema and into the realm of the real, with Arthur we realize that he contains only layer upon layer of acting, and that thus there is for Arthur only cinema. If Arthur refuses to share anything real, however, *Actor Martinez* as a film insists upon exposing that cinema is empty, hence its hyper-self-consciousness as we see the directors directing the film.



Mike and Nathan spring a surprise sex scene on Arthur and Lindsay in *Actor Martinez*.



Lindsay is a “name” and a body for *Actor Martinez* – cannily below Eadweard Muybridge-style images of the swimming woman objectified (cinema as a history of objectification and exploitation).





Specifically the patriarchal nature of cinema (and of the cinematic society) is exposed when the filmmakers ask Arthur and Lindsay without warning to perform a sex scene, with Mike specifically asking her from off camera if she will go topless. Since Burdge is “a name,” *Actor Martinez* reminds us of the objectification of women (and perhaps of film stars more generally). *Actor Martinez* does not get around this, but it does highlight it by exposing the patriarchal nature of the filmmaking process, specifically in this scene, in which Mike’s direction is not hidden but instead made explicitly clear (at least on the film’s soundtrack as we hear Mike talk from off screen). In other words, the film exposes the patriarchal mechanisms of filmmaking, and by extension of capital, again reinforcing a sense that *Actor Martinez* is somehow not cinema. The seemingly improvised aspects of the film would suggest something similar—a desire to get away from a script and to produce a film that in the process escapes cinema as pre-scripted performance (“none of this film is about prep,” sighs a fatigued Arthur at one point).

At the film’s end, Arthur explains how recently he has been listening to Eminem (we see two short bursts during the film of Arthur rapping along to the musician in his car). From Eminem he has learned that perhaps one needs to expose one’s failures and say “bad stuff” about oneself in order to achieve something



Lindsay is an optician who supposedly helps Arthur to “see” in *Actor Martinez*.

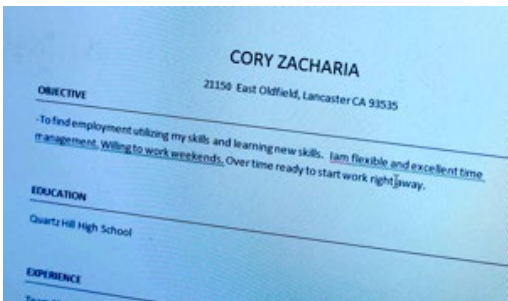
meaningful. But Ott and Silver seem less interested in capturing a performance of failure than in pushing Arthur towards a failure of performance, to a point where he no longer can perform. This is not for Arthur merely to admit or to expose “bad” stuff but to reach a point where cinema breaks down (and where it becomes hard to tell fiction apart from documentary). *Actor Martinez* is thus an exercise in honesty, but an honesty about the performative nature of honesty itself. In posing but not resolving questions about this topic, *Actor Martinez* in some senses becomes a film in which nothing happens. And yet *Actor Martinez* also sees the creation of a community and the creation of a film. Its failure is in some respects its very success; in existing, *Actor Martinez* challenges conventional (capitalist) definitions of what cinema is or can be. It thus paradoxically proves the coming-into-existence of the previously-non-existent, the reality of capital’s outside, in that there is or can be a world outside of capital, since capital is not fixed and eternal, but rather contingent and possible to change.

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| Arthur struggles to cope with the pressure that Mike and Nathan put on him, especially as they push their lead actor to cry in <i>Actor Martinez</i> . | Arthur returns home towards the end of <i>Actor Martinez</i> to find the crew taking apart the set. |
|  |  |
| Arthur slumps on to his couch in <i>Actor Martinez</i> . Is he no longer able to perform? | Mike and Nathan lay bare the process of filmmaking in <i>Actor Martinez</i> (in a shot that recalls Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s <i>Salaam Cinema/Hello Cinema</i> , 1995). |

California Dreams

With their self-conscious and performative dimensions, Ott’s films reinforce in the contemporary era the ongoing need for what Gilles Deleuze would term time-images: images of another time that is not our own, which allows us to contemplate therefore that the world might be different. Cinema is put to paradoxical work in expressing what lies beyond the typical purview of a reality defined precisely by cinema, or in which only the cinematic is considered real.[19] If Ott tries to drive Cory and Arthur to the point of failing to perform, then in certain respects his cinema does the same. He seeks not to repeat what we already see in other films (to make clichés), even if his films involve savvy intertextual references. And he does not put forward an “accelerationist” approach to cinema, whereby he would ramp up the cinematic in order to try to break cinema, even if *Actor Martinez* comes closest to this.

Nor is it that Ott’s cinema is a “slow” cinema that deliberately goes against the fast



Struggling with new technology: Cory tries to put together a CV in *California Dreams*.



Cory discusses his sexual experiences in a car with John Brotherton in *California Dreams*. The car-based confession recalls Abbas Kiarostami's *Dah/Ten* (2002).



Cory and Patrick hire a stripper in *California Dreams*: is this Patrick's fantasy, or Cory's?

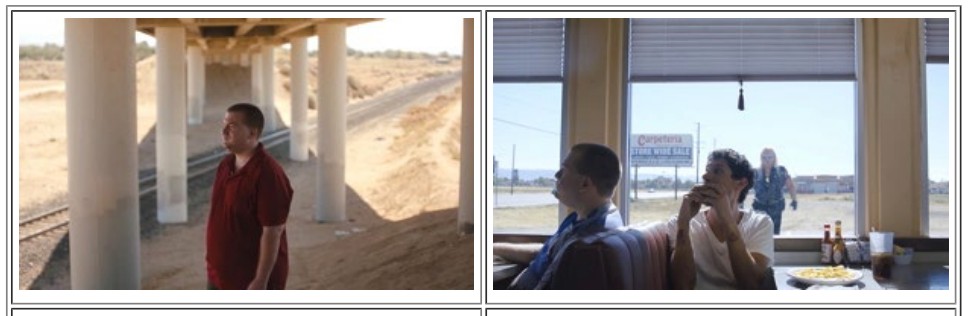


Cory does an audition for an unspecified project in *California Dreams*. The interview set-up recalls Jean-Pierre Léaud's Antoine Doinel discussing his sexual experiences in *Les 400 Coups/The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959).

pace of the contemporary world. Even if Cory is stuck in Antelope Valley, the films themselves nonetheless maintain a regular cutting speed, involving a camera that is sometimes mobile, sometimes not. Instead Ott's work is perhaps somewhere in between these two positions, stylistically close to conventional cinema as Antelope Valley is geographically close to Hollywood—and yet somehow worlds apart. Having gone to Denver to work with Silver on *Actor Martinez*, Ott has not gone on to make bigger movies as might be expected (and follow the career trajectories of other mumblecore directors). Instead, Ott makes small movies that are defiantly small. He loyally returns to Antelope Valley and to Cory Zacharia for his latest film, *California Dreams*, in which Cory, too, seems to pass up his opportunity to become cinematic and to work on director Gronkowski's film in Germany, even though Cory has been saying since *Pearblossom Hwy* that he wants to go to Europe (London in that film; in *California Dreams* Cory wants to visit Finland).

But is Ott beginning merely to repeat himself, to become clichéd and turn his failures of performance into performances of failure? It could be argued that this is so. However, while Cory is still in Lancaster looking for a job—we see him here struggle with the computers that Arthur Martinez navigates so easily as he tries to put together a CV to find work—in other ways Cory has changed. The differences are slight but significant: Cory now has conversations in cars, albeit that they are parked and going nowhere. He discusses his sexual experiences, including homosexual ones, with a character played by John Brotherton and who could thus be his brother Jeff from *Pearblossom Hwy*. Cory also talks with Patrick about the latter's lack of sexual experience before taking him to a prostitute. The prostitute is not Anna/Atsuko but a blonde white woman (Jeanie Marie Sullivan), whom Cory and Patrick watch as she dances in slow motion. Has Cory become an exploiter of bodies after himself being exploited? Is this something that he has learned from Francisco, who in *Lake Los Angeles* also offers himself moments of cinema by visiting strippers? Or are these fantasy sequences, like the taxi ride at the end, in which these would-be cinematic moments cover over how Cory and Patrick are anything but cinematic? It is not entirely clear, but in coming back to Cory, Ott perhaps presents to us an image of change, a 21st century American Antoine Doinel who still dreams of becoming cinema, but who still somehow cannot make it.

What is more, Cory is still not alone. Not only does the film contain Patrick, but also others trying to find their way into and/or dream about being in the movies, including would-be screenwriter Neil (Neil Harley); K-Nine (Kevin Gilger), who models himself on bounty hunter Duane "Dog" Chapman; and Carolan (Carol Anne Lombardi). The latter in particular presents to us a heartbreaking story of a woman who dreams of winning an Oscar for a film based upon her own life living in a car for two years. We see her Oscar fantasy play out in a motel room much like the sequence with the stripper. The car may represent mobility, but for Carolan it is also all that she has (she describes the vehicle as her "salvation" and her "prison"). K-Nine meanwhile plays a police officer/bounty hunter of sorts; he sporadically turns up to arrest Cory. Cory sits in cars and talks with each of these characters.



In *California Dreams*, wannabe screenwriter Neil Harley stands by the railway tracks where the train left Cory behind in *LITTLEROCK*.



Carolyn auditions for her part in *California Dreams*.

K-Nine, as a figure of law and order, comes to arrest Cory for not conforming to the cinematic society in *California Dreams*.



Wanting to be cinematic: Carolyn imagines winning an Oscar for the film about her life in *California Dreams*.



An advertisement crystalizes how everyone is encouraged to become cinematic in *California Dreams*.



Cory creates a new community at acting class in *California Dreams*.



Cory also forges new communities by having conversations with others in cars that sit before the California desert landscape in *California Dreams*.



Cory prepares to make his Coppola-inspired VHS audition tape for Henning in *California Dreams*.

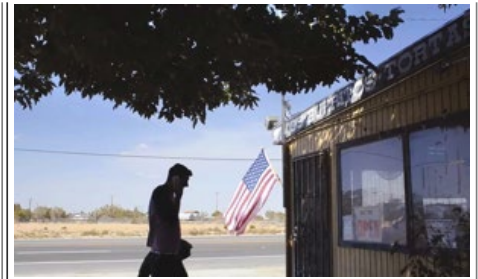
New communities are thus created, as at the film's end Cory walks past them all at a motel before getting into the taxi with Mark Borchardt. Of course, Cory's audition VHS sees him reciting lines from *The Outsiders* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1983). With his community of friends, Cory is part of independent U.S. cinema's new fragile band of outsiders, precariously existing on the margins of and perhaps even outside of cinema.

"You're on the new frontier. You're definitely exploring new territory," says Mark to Cory as the latter describes his plans to visit Europe. But Ott does not have to visit Europe. He is able to find a new frontier right here on the old frontier, a new territory right here in the old territory. He does this by exploring the failure of performance and by making small form films that are about the territory and those who inhabit it, as opposed to those who simply exploit it and pass on through. May Ott's films get ever smaller yet.





Cory auditions for Henning in another dilapidated house in the desert in *California Dreams*.



The real America lies outside of cinema? A U.S. flag flies as over the phone Henning threatens to drop Cory from his film in *California Dreams*.



From pedestrian to cyclist: Cory develops as a character as he bikes around Lancaster at the beginning of *California Dreams*...



Cory drives off in a fantasy taxi to explore "new frontiers" at the end of *California Dreams*.

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Notes

1. See Richard Brody, "The Best Movies of 2017," *The New Yorker*, December 8 2017, accessed December 11 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2017-in-review/the-best-movies-of-2017>. [return to page 1]
2. Yannis Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies: Classics Divisions, Specialty Labels and the American Film Market* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 194. See also Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 116-119.
3. David Church, "'Propane is the Pussies': *Bellflower*'s bromance of retro technology and hip masculinity," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 55 (Fall 2013), accessed December 11 2017, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/ChurchBellflower/>.
4. Aymar Jean Christian, "Joe Swanberg, Intimacy, and the Digital Aesthetic," *Cinema Journal*, 50, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 135.
5. Maria San Filippo, "A Cinema of Recession: Micro-Budgeting, Micro-Drama, and the 'Mumblecore' Movement," *Cineaction*, 85 (2011), accessed July 27 2015, <http://www.cineaction.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/issue85sample1.pdf>.
6. Church, "'Propane is the Pussies.'"
7. Anna Backman Rogers, *American Independent Cinema: Rites of Passage and the Crisis Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 122.
8. See Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2006).
9. For more on the concept of non-cinema, including in relation to Giuseppe Andrews, see William Brown, "Non-Cinema: Digital, Ethics, Multitude," *Film-Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2016): 104-130.
10. Mike Ott (n.d.) "*Analog Days* (2006) Plot Summary," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed August 10 2015, http://www.imdb.com/title/tto801819/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl.
11. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
12. The phrase "pushing carts" cannot help but recall—even if inadvertently—Ramin Bahrani's searing critique of immigrant labor in *Man Push Cart* (2005). In some senses, Bahrani is a filmmaker with whom Ott has a lot in common, not least their concern for labor. [return to page 2]
13. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1984), 10.

14. Mike Hale, “Young Tourists Marooned in a California Town,” *The New York Times*, August 11 2011, accessed August 10 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/movies/littlerock-directed-by-mike-ott-review.html?_r=0.

15. The casting of Dillon in this small role as a seeming homosexual runs counter to his masculine image as Brody in *LiTTLE ROCK*. Perhaps Ott is pointing gently towards the unstable sexuality of even the most “masculine” characters in his cinematic universe. [[return to page 3](#)]

16. For a classic study of *chicano* cinema, see Chon A. Noriega, *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance* (New York: Garland, 1992).

17. I first became aware of Mike Ott’s films at the 2011 CPH PIX Film Festival in Copenhagen, Denmark, where there was a retrospective of Ott’s first three films (*Analog Days*, *Kid Icarus* and *LiTTLE ROCK*). Also showing at that festival was *Afterimages* (2010), a micro-budget film directed by William Brown—also the author of the essay on non-cinema referenced above. *Afterimages*, which tells the story of a Guatemalan baker living in Scotland (Dennis Chua) and who develops an uneasy relationship with a much younger woman (Flossie Topping), also features Jeanette’s “¿Por qué te vas?” at various points on the soundtrack. Perhaps *Lake Los Angeles* is channelling both Saura’s and Brown’s films as Ott explores how Cecilia and Francisco both exist outside of cinema, or “after images.” Although this insight is somewhat speculative, it is supported by the fact that both filmmakers were present at the festival and thus quite possibly met. [[return to page 4](#)]

18. The inclusion of Burdge in *Actor Martinez* perhaps makes the film the most “mumblecore” of Ott’s work, in that Burdge is associated with the movement via parts in Noah Baumbach’s *Frances Ha* (2012) and Joe Swanberg’s *All the Light in the Sky* (2012) and *Digging for Fire* (2015).

19. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2005).





In Godard's cinematic overture to *Notre musique*, two images precede the film suggesting a landscape of trauma and terror: a female victim...



... and a weapon.



Cinema of warfare as a landscape of loss.

Lost landscapes: representations of war and reconciliation in Godard's *Notre musique* (2004)

by [Vojislava Filipcevic Cordes](#)

"But the landscape of devastation is still a landscape."
— Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)

Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre musique* (2004) probes the elasticity of cinematic interactions between the histories and the representations of warfare through semi-documentary searches for reconciliation in the post-war Bosnian cities of Sarajevo and Mostar. The searches are presented as both traversals and attempts to bypass the territories of the image(s), the language(s), and the body.

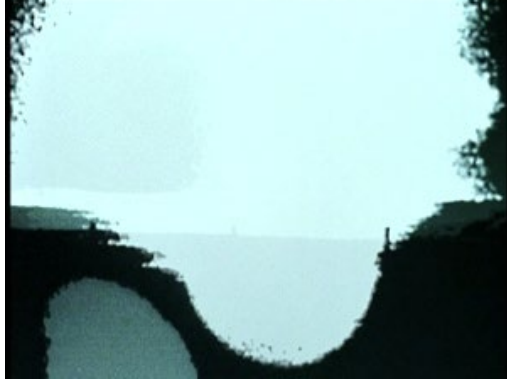
In this essay, I examine several dimensions of Godard's project in *Notre musique*:

- the challenge of connecting multiple histories of warfare as a part of the auteur's cinematic critique of the relationship between history and film;
- Godard's spatial imagination; and
- cinematic bridges and boundary crossings (by analyzing the intersection between the socio-spatial and the linguistic motifs, and the montage technique).

These dimensions of Godard's project in *Notre musique* are best examined through the lenses of the film's Balkan milieu in Sarajevo and Mostar. They represent narrative and visual background settings as well as metaphorical milieux for probing cinematic relations with histories of warfare, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and possibilities for reconciliation.

Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre musique* questions the capacity of camera to act as a witness in a documentary sense.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Rather than witnessing, through image juxtapositions cinema becomes a "trespasser" across the elusive boundary between the actual and the imagined, the documentary and fiction, creating at times, through montage,[2] a pathway (or a bridge) between the two, connecting different historical times and alternate histories of warfare and conquest. *Notre musique* completes Godard's challenge to war films by means of a cinema of border crossings and reconciliation. The film presents as well a visual query into cinematic crossings between digital and analog images. This enables theoretical questioning of the reflexive potential of cinematic contingency "to force a mediation on the history of its own impossible fate within modernity"[3] precisely in a critical moment when film is both challenged and renewed by digital technologies and by a revival of documentary.

Cinematic contingency, in its resistant and heterogeneous potential, is tied to the medium's "technological promise to capture time"—indeed its multiple and



Primacy of the visual landscape vs. illegible representations of warfare.



Godard seems to ask as well whether the landscape of cinema can imagine a different future.



Narrating warfare as a "fable".

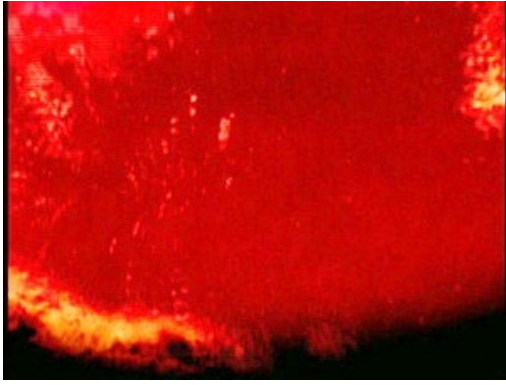
condensed temporalities—and to *represent* (the illusion of) movement[4]—the fleeting, ephemeral, random, unpredictable, elusive moments recorded permanently as the present in time is registered and stored compulsively, offering to the *spectator*[5] as well an "immersion in *other* spaces and times," into the diversities and multiplicities of life.[6] Cinematic contingency, which may resist and elude coding, is itself a part of capitalist modernity in which time is stratified and coded by the needs of capital. Storytelling can reinforce the bourgeois notion of the individual "yoked to a meaning guaranteed by his or her mortality"[7] yet endangered by the lure and the threat of the very anxiety-ridden contingency.

Kracauer's "politically grounded critique of ideology... takes aim at the film's recycling of outdated bourgeois forms." [8] By comparing cinema to modernity he highlights "traumatic and pathological effects as well as [cinema's] transformational, emancipatory possibilities." [9] Doane cites Simmel's perhaps outdated and exaggerated theories that link temporality, space, and the "money economy" by making metropolitan life—the site of intensification of nervous stimuli—"unimaginable without the most punctual integration of all activities and natural relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule." [10] This is nevertheless relevant here as film can serve a "psychological and ideological function of ordering and regulating time to in order to stabilize the subjective [although too commonly stereotypical] identity produced by an overstimulating environment of industrial modernity." [11] Yet film also in turn can shape a subjectivity (including that of the spectator) whose "very sense of identity, stability and control is threatened by the otherness of the material world." [12]

As an example of a "spatialized experience of time," [13] of "a specific configuration of sensualism as the basis for a material aesthetics," and of "an *aesthetics of reconciliation*," [14] *Notre musique*'s ruined post-war cities of Bosnia in the process of recovery and revitalization are observed during fleeting moments as the real and fictional protagonists traverse the illegible *landscape* of recent trauma and terror. This landscape becomes for Godard a metaphor for contemporary critical art cinema, and the auteur engages, of course, in a critique of the visually seductive and spectacular powers of landscape. Indeed, Godard's "penchant for interspersing clips from the history of cinema within the diegetic world of film, suggests that he sees cinema itself as a kind of landscape." [15] The history (of cinema) for Godard is a requirement to believe in different and multiple stories, [16] but the auteur's concern is also with the problems of memory, the right and the obligation to witness, [17] and the (im)possibility of testimony.

Miriam Hansen's notions of experience (*Erfahrung*), and of cinema as a public sphere, are critical in understanding the possibilities of a cinema of reconciliation. For Hansen, experience "crucially came to entail the capacity of memory—individual and collective, involuntary as well as cognitive—and the ability to imagine a different future" [18] Kracauer saw film as "an at once a sensory and reflexive discourse uniquely suited to capturing the experience of a disintegrated world [following World War I]." [19] It was "both symptom of the historical process and sensory-reflexive horizon for dealing with its effects." [20] Hansen's interpretation of Kracauer is especially relevant here because of Kracauer's and indeed Godard's [referring to World War II] charges that cinema neither represented a critique of modernity as "the negativity of the historical process" nor did it "live up to the liberating, egalitarian impulses." [21] Gertrude Koch argues in turn:

"The primacy of the visual, what Kracauer terms the redemption of reality through its pictorial representation, comes up against intrinsic limits in those areas that are to be redeemed in the image and are supposed to permit anamnestic solidarity with the dead—for they



The impossibility of representing the horrors of warfare.



Consequences of violence and the question of the ways in which audiences confront, reflect upon, conquer, and come to terms with terror.



Critiquing the idea of the West as "civilizing" the rest of the world?

elude visual presentation in any form."[22]

According to Hansen, Kracauer "conceived of film as material expression—not just representation—of a particular historical experience. It is an objective correlative, as it were, of a particular historical process"[23]—a medium that has the capacity to advance the process of a world that is literally going to pieces, leading the spectator with an autonomous agency to visualize a utopian future of justice and peace.[24] Kracauer "incorporates the threat of annihilation, disintegration, and mortal fear into his film aesthetics as a fundamental historical experience." [25] His *Theory of film* is haunted by the question of film after Auschwitz,[26] although hesitantly so since, according to Koch, mass-annihilation was quite anathema to Kracauer.[27] It is much like how Godard's recent oeuvre is haunted by the question of film after ethnic cleansing—which was, however, televised.

Projecting history, resisting narrative: warfare in *Les Carabiniers*, *Éloge de l'amour*, and *For Ever Mozart*

As Rosenstone has argued, popular audiences increasingly learn history through televised and cinematic vision—a fact that has made both historians and cineastes uneasy, as much as it has also opened avenues for alternate interpretations of historical events, suppressed narratives, and alternate forms of telling stories.[28] War films in particular, illuminate, reconstruct, manipulate or ignore historical events in their aim to critique violence; they at once expose the specific consequences of violence and also uncover the universal meanings of devastation. Yet "ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings." [29] Kracauer's premise in the context of the Western European World War II cinema was that a war film might fulfill its mimetic potential by representing the imagined yet unimaginable tragedy through which audiences can confront, reflect upon, conquer, or come to terms with terror. As Annette Insdorf has observed, however, filmmakers actively "shap[e] history into a heightened form of communication." [30]

Contemporary engagements with the historical narratives in Western art cinema in particular are increasingly seen as segments, shards, shadows—that is, mere fragments of visions whose mimetic potential is questioned, if not completely suspended.[31] Reflexive critique in war film would thus suspend the reliance on individual protagonists and would also offer a critical stance towards implied and explicit national "imagined communities" commonly upheld by the narratives of heroism. As Sontag notes, "Images of dead civilians and smashed houses may serve to quicken the hatred of the foe." [32] Behnke and de Cavalho have noted that Western mainstream war film often takes for granted a Western perspective seen as "civiliz[ing] the rest of the world" and avoids politically contested positions.[33] Thus the question for the critical reflexive cinema of warfare becomes what cinematic—visual and narrative—tools can be used to critique the notions of military triumph or national pride, to probe the role of the military apparatus and the political leadership, to reexamine the notion of heroism?

Starting with the premise that cinema creates only the "reality of its own making," [34] yet also consistently calling for film's social and political responsibility, Godard has offered a set of responses to this question. He has done so throughout his extensive and unrelenting engagement with history as well as history of film; I only cite selected examples in *Les Carabiniers* (1963), *Le Petit soldat* (1963), *Ici et ailleurs* (1976), *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989, 1997, 1998), *For Ever Mozart* (1996), and *Éloge de l'amour* (2001).



According to Godard, cinema has failed to document the horrors of the Holocaust, falling short of its historical mission.



Camera as a weapon?



Mass annihilation and a cinema haunted by the question of film after Auschwitz.

As Robert Stam has argued, the doyen of the nouvelle vague has long fought a guerilla warfare of his own, his art “a special gun” and his film a “theoretical rifle” taking aim at bourgeois culture, capitalist society, and especially at the cinematic conventions that replicate and sustain them.[35] But *Notre musique* approaches Godard’s political project differently. The film breaks with the aesthetic and ideological tradition of Godard’s earlier war film, *Les Carabiniers*, while also adopting an anti-war stance. The film’s linkages between narratives of the nation and of the self follow the trajectories of Godard’s recent films such as *Germany Year 90*, *For Ever Mozart*, and *Éloge de l’amour*. *Notre musique*, however, casts Godard’s critique of warfare and his protagonists’ searches of reconciliation through the prisms of multiple border and boundary crossings.

Godard’s engagement with the historical narrative in *Notre musique* has to be seen as a dialogue between a) the cinematic capacities to expose multiple possibilities of history, as Doane suggested in her interpretation of Kracauer,[36] and b) the challenge of visualizing the simultaneous co-presence of several layers of the historical past and present. The first aspect is subverted by the second, as Jeffrey Skoller has suggested in his application of Deleuze’s vision of cinematic sedimentation of history within political avant-garde film.[37] According to Skoller, avant-garde films

"work to undermine the gaps between past and present by using a range of cinematic strategies to consider elements of the past that are unseen, unspeakable, ephemeral, and defy representation not necessarily verifiable through normal empirical means."[38]

Calling into question linear chronologies, sharpening awareness of other temporalities, emphasizing the significance of fragments, presenting the "occluded, incomplete, intuited," these films suggest the poetics of history[39] and present the past as an experience that transforms the present given that, following Deleuze, "the movement of time is always the potential for transformation and new thought." [40]

"[I]t is the experience of thought through the lapses and disruptions in the flow of time that occur in gaps between nonlinking images that evoke the unseeable, the forgotten, the spectral qualities of history." [41]

Moreover, "[t]he sign of Auschwitz continues to haunt the intellectual worlds of Europe and America"[42]—rendering "established forms of narration" and "representational modes based on solid distinctions" "no longer functional or meaningful:"[43] the Shoah presents a profound challenge for avant-garde art. At the same time, through Hollywood and international film and television corporations,

"Shoah-business, with its vast marketing and distribution networks, creates a yearly outpouring of gut-wrenching and eye-popping historical melodramas that threaten to obscure other cinematic approaches to these histories."[44]

Notre musique engages most explicitly with two prior pillars of Godard’s “war” on war in film: the relation between cinema and contemporary historical events, and the author’s position regarding visions of warfare in film. First, as James S. Williams, Colin McCabe, Junji Hori, and Libby Saxton have written, Godard has condemned cinema for failing to document the horrors of the Holocaust, thus falling short on its historical mission.[45/46] Cinema, according to Godard, failed



Female victim and representations of the unspeakable and the unseen.



The final shots of Robert Aldrich's striking noir *Kiss Me Deadly* end a powerful staccato sequence of images of human and material destruction in Hell.



Sequences with women soldiers and victims follow after we have seen all unimaginable and imagined cruelties (Godard thus does not identify women in simplistic terms only as victims as a typical war film would).

to bear "witness" to a key historical moment. In Godard's vocabulary, this transgression is recast in moral and religious terms: cinema has "sinned" by not confronting a grave historical truth of the 20th century. Godard's quest for "pure" cinema thus paradoxically turns into a parable of power—the impotence of cinema (art) can be reversed by the presumed potency of the auteur (presumably himself) whose mission is to confront bourgeois ideological biases and the might of the industrial apparatus of film. This has led to ontologically limiting interpretations of turning the camera into a weapon for the purposes of "visual revelation" of social injustice (war, colonialism, etc.).[47] Daniel Morgan argues,

"The war provided an occasion for the rediscovery of the facts, the importance of being attuned to the world: the fulfillment of the rights and duties cinema inherited from photography... Not only was the cinema unable to show audiences atrocities that were yet to happen; neither could it reveal these events as they were taking place."[48]

Furthermore, responding to Godard, Claude Lanzmann (*Shoah*, 1985) "argued that, by using photographic images of Holocaust victims, Godard effectively belies that scale of genocide perpetuated by the Nazis. Since no image can possibly represent the entirety of what happened, images should not be presented at all; what is shown can only concern *these* people at *this* moment."[49] According to Susan Sontag,

"As Hannah Arendt pointed out soon after the end of the Second World War, all the photographs and newsreels of the concentration camps are misleading because they show the camps at the moment the Allied troops marched in. What makes the images unbearable—the piles of corpses, the skeletal survivors—was not at all typical for the camps, which, when they were functioning, exterminated their inmates systematically (by gas, not starvation and illness), then immediately cremated them. And photographs echo photographs: it was inevitable that the photographs of emaciated Bosnian prisoners at Omarska, the Serb death camp created in northern Bosnia in 1992, would recall the photographs taken in the Nazi death camps in 1945." [50]

Godard's notion of the cinematic "sin" also misconstrues cinema's historical dimension that his recent films have tackled more delicately and fruitfully than did his rhetoric or his earlier films. Following Jeffrey Skoller's analysis of avant-garde cinema, it could be argued that Godard's films belong to an opus more concerned with the present than the past where a relation between the present and the past represents a form of knowledge — yet a knowledge that cannot perhaps "repair our ignorance about the history and causes of the suffering it picks out and frames"[51]—which necessitates active spectatorship.

Another point concerns the contemporary crisis of representation of war in film. Godard's criticism of war films as spectacles of destruction has in fact anticipated this crisis in war film. Our visual culture is saturated with hegemonic representations of combat, particularly in high budget Hollywood productions that glorify violence through the spectacle of military triumph or belligerent masculinity, directly or indirectly, even if they may contain anti-war messages. [52] As Sontag has written about photographs, "In a world in which photography is brilliantly at the service of consumerist manipulations, no effect of a photograph of a doleful scene can be taken for granted." [53] Thus Godard has deplored Steven Spielberg, in particular in Spielberg's violation of the Bazinian



Children play war games in the trenches.

vision of the cinematic “reality” through the creation of “fake” concentration camps in *Schindler’s List*. The extremity of this position aside and its possible counterpoints,[54] under the influence of contemporary Hollywood productions popular audiences have grown accustomed to receiving an anti-war message through an ambivalent or unlikely hero, but only after financial and industrial might have staged a grand spectacle, without illusions, of exploding flesh and mortar (yet this is of course a stereotype as well). Godard’s views in this context are more significant with regard to commercial pressures on art cinema, and the evocation of Bazin would be contradictory to his own opus. While Godard’s stances can be challenged—the high moral call placed on film art to expose and even prevent genocide and his complete rejection of recent Hollywood, above all, the nouvelle vague auteur’s inability to “negotiat[e] the greater realities of now-late-twentieth century carnage with his poetic, aphoristic style”[55]—the films’ value lies more in the questions they pose.[56]

Godard’s films redefine Kracauer’s quest by redeeming film from the corruptions of spectacle in Debord’s terms[57] by adopting a different visual and narrative language. This set of techniques has included narrative breaks and disorientations, asynchronicity, jumpcuts, elliptical connections, spontaneity, Brechtian detachment (especially in his 1960s films), allegorical vignettes, and, above all, montage that stresses reflexivity over submission to the spectacle-qualities of images. As David Sterritt has pointed out, Godard’s visual style, which has evolved greatly over the past decades, represents a form of creative experimentation, a “work in progress” and “an attempt at cinema” that constantly reexamines and challenges the notions of the documentary and the fictional. [58/59] But as his once-challenging cinematic form has also been in part adopted by contemporary film and media, this aspect of Godard’s older (and more daring) rhetoric precludes a possible redefinition of contemporary cinema.

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The impossibility of testimony to the horrors of warfare and emancipatory possibilities of cinema as a trespasser for whose sins Godard is seeking forgiveness.



The notion of trespass (which also evokes the concept of property) here refers not merely to the active sins of warriors but also to the sins of omission of the twentieth century perceptual machine—the cinema.

Godard presents an additional challenge to mainstream cinema through his emphasis on alternative narrative forms. Mainstream cinema is characterized by a lack of ambiguity and an absence of ironic juxtaposition. In the case of mainstream war films, the banality of spectacle does not expose the banality of war. With narrative and visual asymmetries ironed-out and spectacularized, such films project a misleading vision of war. These visions are complete opposite from those of *Les Carabiniers*, an anti-spectacle war film in which absurdity, lunacy, and randomness of violence rule. The two main protagonists, named sarcastically Ulysses and Michael-Ange, are village idiots lured into warfare by the prospect of plundering. They ask of a recruiter,

“In the war can we take slot machines? No charges if we take old man’s eye glasses? Can we break a kid’s arm? Both arms? Stab a guy in the back? Rob apartments? Burn towns? Burn women?... If we want, can we massacre the innocent people?”

The response in the film is “Yes. Yes. That is war.” Misled, fooled, debilitated by violence, Ulysses and Michael-Ange finally end up killed themselves. Stam argued further that *Les Carabiniers* also represents an antidote to the anti-war film, establishing instead a cinema of reflexivity, a meditation on warfare in film.[60] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

This vision discerns two motifs, both I argue in part unwieldy: the absurdity and purposelessness of all wars (hence their equation), and the incapacity of cinema to confront this notion, that is, to ever create an anti-war message. These motifs perhaps need to be situated in the contexts of a post-Hiroshima disenchantment with heroic narratives and the ideological misuses of World War Two by both blocs during the Cold War. A “just war” narrative is in this manner reduced to a product of ideological representation, and the cinematic powers of spectacle function to further enhance the ideological display of power.

Les Carabiniers explicitly counters these hegemonies by placing a strong emphasis on the absurdity of war (although inspired by Brechtian techniques, Godard departs from theater through advanced visual grammar). *Les Carabiniers* renders the anti-war message implausible, and consequently, the cinema of liberty an impostor. An intertitle towards the end of the film announces, “There is no victory. Only flags and fallen men.” By emphasizing detachment and avoiding the empathetic connections, Godard’s vision in *Les Carabiniers* in part flattens all other effects—the audience struggles to derive the capacity for confronting the horrors of war, making both Bazin’s and Kracauer’s realist approaches questionable. Viewing excludes the potential to contemplate positions of resistance, even if the film itself signifies “resistance.”[61] Godard’s war cinema of visual and narrative challenge bears the mark of another cinematic representational crisis.

This point is particularly significant given Godard’s concern for relations between social and artistic responsibility, particularly in the historically specific, rather than allegorical (as is the case with *Les Carabiniers*) narratives of warfare in which the blurring of the past and the present contexts occurs. Leslie Hill argues that Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinema* posits engagement

“not only with the historical past, where ghosts reside, but also with



Cinema on its own terms returns to images and montage yet seeks resurrection and forgiveness of trespasses.



Images as mute testimonies.



A ghastly still of a pastoral landscape of several hanged people, including a woman.

the unhistorical future, the time without time when ghosts are always liable to return—to haunt us and recall us to our responsibilities.”[62]

And, importantly, to recall is not only to remember a narrative, but to call up or conjure haunting images yet memories can also alter images, and "remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering." [63] *Histoire(s) du cinema* is Godard's "memorial" to cinema, "repository of shards of cinema,"[64] his response to *Shoah* and the absence of archival footage of the concentration camps[65] resulting in the rejection of documentary and historiography in film which meant "death of the European cinema and the triumph of American cinema." [66] It cannot be omitted, however, that Godard excludes non-Western cinemas from *Historie(s)*, neglecting Asian, African, Latin American cinemas, as well as the entire cinemas after 1960.[67]

Godard's earlier film from the Dziga Vertov phase, *Ici et ailleurs*, completed years after the interrupted shooting of his Palestinian-sponsored documentary *Jusqu'à la victoire*, cuts between the documentary footage of contestation in Palestine and in daily life of a middle-class family in France. Godard attempts to tackle relations between the two places in order to "learn to see here to understand elsewhere" as Anne-Marie Miéville, the film's narrator, artistic director, and Godard's long-term partner and collaborator, relates. "The others" are, as Miéville stresses, "the elsewhere of our here." While establishing linkages across borders, *Ici et ailleurs* whose documentary footage that filmed many Palestinians who later died in combat, also questions the cinematic capacity to represent conflict and warfare. As Miéville narrates over intertitles—a marker of Godard's filmmaking since the 1960s—that read LE MORT, IMAGE, SON, SILENCE, SILENCE, VIVANT,

"Death is represented in this film by the flow of images. A flow of images and sounds that hide silence. A silence that becomes deadly because it is prevented to come alive."

In Deleuzian terms, a sedimentation between the past and the present takes place; daily life in a middle-class Western setting has been falsified by the deaths taking place elsewhere—as a more recent theory of cinema, ironically, arrives much later than Godard's original contributions since the 1960s. The porousness of space is not simply confined to the actual settings where atrocities took place, as in Resnais' Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog*, but rather signals global spatial interdependence and interconnectedness in a nascent form.

A rejoinder and a set of challenges to the visualization of historical memory can further be found in Godard's more recent work. In a striking set of sequences in his film *Éloge de l'amour* (2001) for instance, an elderly French Holocaust survivor actually sells her memories to Steven Spielberg's film producer. Godard bypasses the simplicity and crudeness of the anti-American critique[68] by subverting the emphasis on the "great" cinematic "robbery" of the Bazinian ideal in a contrasting sequence that follows. In it, the Holocaust survivor's granddaughter reads passages from, ironically, Robert Bresson's *Notes on the Cinematograph*, and then queries the grandmother's motives for selling her history, her inner recollections. The old lady replies that when lecturing in the U.S. about her war experiences, she felt only cold detachment from her audiences.



War film is but a shadow of real horrors of devastation.

This speaks to the powerlessness of both words and images, and also of the need for a genuine capacity for empathy, one that in Godard's art would flow from reflexive engagement.

In *For Ever Mozart* (and also in *Notre musique*), this transference is mediated by the pure abstraction of classical music cadences. In the concert that ends the film, theoretically no trespass occurs; rather, the implied (and of course, problematic) purity of the artistic abstraction enables the immediacy of connection with the listener.[69] The deceptive sublime bypasses both the social and the interpretative context, wishing for the exit of art from the world of shadows and indictment into the Platonic ideal—a strain that often resurfaces in Godard's art to then be quickly subjected to irony and reversal.

In *Éloge de l'amour*, Godard's response to *Shoah*, *Schindler's List*, and *Lucie Aubrac*,[70] Godard attempts a high-flown visual equivalent. He presents a beautiful dissolving shot of the beloved grandmother[71] by lamplight that melts into a sky of refracted sunlight with albatrosses. She is letting go of her memories, and this parting, even through an uncertain, incomplete, fractured, and certainly commercialized mediation, brings liberation. Godard suggested "that for people who lived through such persecution, perhaps, the war never really ended." [72] The Jews of *Eloge de l'amour* are thus according to Brody burdened by memory and Godard allows the images to serve as mute testimonies.[73] This enables Godard's cinema to exit the entrapments of absurdist narratives or simplicities of the predictable critique of Hollywood and mass media, while still challenging the more reductive languages of spectacle.



Remembering Sarajevo.

The visual lecture on "how the gaze collapsed" that is also a part of *Éloge de l'amour* liberates cinema for yet another renewal. In Deleuze's terms, such framing moves away from the empty set of *Les Carabiniers* to a frame saturated with color and often imagery of nature—the image becomes at once visible and legible.[74] (In another example, "[a]fter a close-up of the book *Le Voyage d'Edgar*, the film bursts from black-and-white into brilliant, acidic color, a seascape with the sea a fiery orange and the sky an acrid yellow, an image that introduces the title card "Two Years Earlier.") [75] In *Éloge de l'amour* the natural imagery thus subverts the spatial geometry, suggesting gradations within the natural settings yet never allowing the audience to experience their weight or measure their scale (as in Antonioni's films, for example).



Three women, perhaps Bosnian, faces in close up, shun the intruding camera before the sequence ends with a black screen.

Cinema on its own terms ("le cinéma seule"), returns to images and montage (as bridges between multiple meanings and visions), to the "greater possibility for reversibility, transfiguration and resurrection." [76] Film also does not reject the beauty of images (as in *Les Carabiniers*), nor does it give up on the narrative's capacity (even if fractured or disorienting) to transform consciousness.[77] The search for alternate forms of narrating the dogs and fools of war or conquest need not mean abandoning narrative's redeeming capacity, although the question becomes more problematic if we consider the sources from which that capacity may be derived.[78]

Reflexive cinema in turn wishes to propel the audience ahead although without leaving it completely behind (or rendering them fools as easily tricked as Michael-Ange in *Les Carabiniers*). [79] Thus, if camera is a "trespasser" between the real and the imagined, it relies in part on both empathic and reflexive engagement to sustain the transgression and to unmask the manipulation (to "suspend disbelief" and to suspend itself). If the illicit aspects of the crossing can underscore active emotional (and intellectual) manipulation, they also speak to the cathartic powers



Godard acknowledges the complicity of representations in producing and reproducing the horror of the real.

of film (a synthesis of all other arts in one view) and the strength of its visual and narrative capacity. This can in fact be derived from a cinema of reflexivity. As Mary Ann Doane argues, cinema could be seen an “homage to possibility,” as *Éloge de l’amour* suggests. If then “the cinematic contingency is not the embodiment of history as mark of the real or referent but history as the mark of what could have been otherwise,”[80] *Notre musique*, more than any recent Godard film and indeed more than many recent war films, takes us along the yet uncharted pathways of that cinematic journey. But *Notre musique* recasts as well the porousness of globally interconnected locations through the return to a narrative of traversals. As compelling as the notion of the visibility and legibility of the image may be in Deleuze’s terms in *Éloge de l’amour*, this quest is insufficient in the case *Notre musique*.

Notre musique’s triptych



The eyes of victims shun the camera, which cannot, morally and technically, become a genuine witness.

Notre musique is a film about war narrated from the point of view of the search for reconciliation—a complete opposite to Godard’s earlier film *Les Carabiniers*, yet also its twin. Peace, after all, is not merely an empty void or a state of no-war; it represents a call for justice served, understanding attained, destroyed edifices rebuilt. It can offer as well a plea for reflexivity and remembrance (“do not forget” and “never again,” as art too has shown us, too easily trespasses onto the narratives of national pride). Here, amidst the dissolving shots of evoked history and the impermanence of remembrance, film art enters the realm of shadows. As Godard states at the beginning of *Le Mépris* (1963),

“Knowledge of the possibility of representation consoles us for being enslaved to life. Knowledge of life consoles us for the fact that representation is but a shadow.”[81]

(It is not perhaps accidental that the same citation is repeated in *For Ever Mozart*, which also takes up the theme of the Bosnian conflict.) War film is but a shadow of the real horrors of devastation (hence, for instance, the quest for humble and not spectacular of Jean Renoir). Yet some of these shadows have imprinted themselves so profoundly onto our memories and selves—they have become in Annette Insdorf’s words, “indelible.” In the flattening, overexposed, montaged universe of Godard’s films, we find no shadows of this sort—rather, rescued from darkness and, for the most part, from dissolving shots of memory, “shadows” walk in the eternal present of the cinema screen as freely Godard himself does among the cast of his “real” and fictional characters.



A French-Israeli translator Ramos Garcia (Rony Kramer), French Jew of Egyptian origin whose father had been an anti-Zionist Communist but whose mother had been a Zionist, offers an autobiographical account of his uneasy belonging to two countries, as Godard underscores the reconciliatory potential of crossings, biographical and linguistic.

Notre musique’s triptych unmasks the shadows of history in the documentary and fictional realms that permeate each other, presenting both the darkness of war and the hopefulness of reconciliation. This represents an example in which the trajectories of historical contingency have been subverted by cinematic sedimentation. Such sedimentation allows Godard to pose the following challenge: the film acknowledges the history of warfare as well as its image manipulations in film, but the alternate trajectories in *Notre musique* are not projected into the past. The contemporary moment is rather saturated with the sedimentation of destruction and ruin, and thus the trajectories within it, those that chart possibilities for reconciliation, are constantly arising anew and also being limited by the histories of conflict. Visions of Bosnian cities are critical in this respect.[82]

Notre musique has the tripartite structure of Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, in



Multiplicity of languages. As Godard has stated of himself, "A language is obviously made to cross borders. I'm someone whose real country is language, and whose territory is movies."



At the Sarajevo Literary Encounters conference, through complex metaphors of border-crossings, multiple attempts at dialogue among his real and fictional protagonists, and using several different languages within speech, Godard seeks transformative pathways within the historical engagement.

which the poet is led from Hell through Purgatory to Heaven. The theme of crossing into foreign territories, real and fictional, is likewise central to *Notre musique*, and the narrative significance of its crossings also lies in the possibilities they offer for reconciliation. In *Notre musique*, Godard rejects Sontag's claim that "it is intolerable to have one's own sufferings twinned with anybody else's." [83] In that sense, my analysis here challenges Brody's view that *Notre musique* represents "a diatribe under the guise of meditation, a work of vituperative prejudice disguised as calm reflection, a work of venom dressed up as a masque." [84]

In the film, the first section, Hell, is a montage of documentary and fictional wars: cowboys and Indians, the Crusaders, World War Two, Vietnam, the Bosnian War. In the present-time section, Purgatory, that follows, Godard deliberately introduces multiple crossings into a main narrative that takes place in post-war Bosnia which is not shown as a site of post-war resentments even if the latter remain real. [85] We meet Godard, on his way to a "Literary Encounters" conference in Sarajevo to give a speech on representations of war and of beauty, of hell and heaven. He is accompanied by a fictional Israeli journalist, Judith Lerner (Sarah Adler), who comes to Bosnia in search of the key to reconciling the Israelis and Palestinians. (Importantly, both the Israeli-Palestinian and the Bosnian conflicts were, according to Sontag, "invested with the meaning of larger struggles." [86]) They are joined in Sarajevo by the following:

- real-life Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo ("whose *Cahier pour Sarajevo* Godard had cited in his video *Je vous salue, Sarajevo* in 1993 and in *JLG/JLG*")
- Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, along with
- a French-Israeli translator Ramos Garcia (Rony Kramer) ("who identified himself as a French Jew if Egyptian origin whose father had been an anti-Zionist Communist but whose mother had been a Zionist," [87])
- three fictional Native American Indians (a stereotype suggestive of white European fantasy of the First Nations) and
- several half-sketched Bosnians who rarely manage to speak for themselves.

Finally, we meet a Russian Jewish woman Olga (Nade Dieu), a filmmaker-revolutionary and a true Godardian heroine. Olga recounts her disillusionment with the politics of conflict in the Middle East and sets the stage for what will be her personal sacrifice mission.

In the final part of the trilogy, Heaven, martyred Olga is saved and walking around in a wooded island in springtime guarded by the U.S. Navy sailors (the soundtrack at one point includes part of the "Marine's Hymn," however). In the last sequence a U.S. Navy sailor literally stamps Olga's arm with a virtual seal of approval as if to acknowledge her final redemptive journey into a protectorate or a rather unusual Heaven.

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Themes of borders, boundaries, and crossings are central to Purgatory from the very first set of shots that take place at the airport and in the passport control area.



Photographs of the victims of the concentration camps labeled "Muselmann" and "Jewish," seem to suggest that the Jew and the Muslim become one and the same casualties.

The Hell of all wars

In Hell's vortex of Thanatos, Godard presents an effective montage of layered newsreel and fictional images of warfare in black and white, technicolor, and in blue and red tones that seep across the screen. The director pays respect to Bruce Conner and Chris Marker (*A Grin without a Cat*—1977), and cites the final shots of Robert Aldrich's striking noir *Kiss Me Deadly* in a powerful staccato final sequence of images of human and material destruction. The tempo and rhythm of shots are visually affecting even if many of the images are well-known and their juxtapositions perhaps unsurprising. The Hell sequence is reminiscent of Godard's homage to film art, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Daring and thought-provoking, many of the *Histoire(s) du cinéma*'s visual philosophy lectures on the nature of the gaze have the sharpness of contrast and the clarity of contradiction that are lacking in the first part of *Notre musique*. But then we are after all in Hell: men carry arms, children play war games, women turn into ruthless soldiers and helpless victims. The narrator reads, "They are horrible here with their obsession for cutting off heads. It's amazing that anyone's survived." (Indeed, "the miracle of survival." [88]) [\[open notes in new window\]](#) The photographs and documentary footage of war-torn Bosnia end with a ghastly still of a pastoral landscape in which several onlookers observe the body of a hanged woman. The pace of Godard's montage slows at this disturbing sight. Three women, perhaps Bosnian, faces in close up, shun the intruding camera before the sequence ends with a black screen.

Sontag writes, "we can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is" and further, "[t]o designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flames." [89] Thus, in the ten-minute Hell sequence that smoothly crosses from documentary to fictional realm, Godard presents images that in their juxtapositions, rhythm, and slow-motion have a seamless if flattening flow. Reality and fiction become two sides of the same coin of death and destruction: the "possible of the impossible" (reality) and the "impossible of the possible" (fiction). It is as Agamben writes:

"Auschwitz represents the historical point in which these processes collapse, the devastating experience in which the impossible is forced into the real. Auschwitz is the existence of the impossible, the most radical negation of contingency; it is, therefore, absolute necessity. The *Muselmann* produced by Auschwitz is the catastrophe of the subjects that then follows, the subject's effacement as the place of contingency and its maintenance as existence of the impossible. Here Goebbels' definition of politics 'the art of making what seems impossible possible' acquires its full weight." [90]

Through this seemingly effortless high-modernist montage, Godard acknowledges the complicity of representations in producing and reproducing the horror of the real, seemingly also suggesting, as Sontag notes "that modern life consists of a menu of horrors by which we are corrupted and to which we gradually become habituated." [91] The sequence explicitly equates the horrific consequences of war: documentary and fictional warfare, just and unjust wars, civil disturbances and foreign occupations. All are different yet the face of horror remains the same. Godard endorses the thesis of the absurdity of war expressed in *Les Carabiniers*,



Godard puns on the word Muselmann used to describe a ruined concentration camp victim.



Cinema attempts to capture the experience of a disintegrated world.

yet here he does so in an alternate way, simultaneously critiquing and conceding to the spectacular and dialectical powers of montage.

However he also inserts and holds a black frame for several seconds between images or sequences, emphasizing the separation of images and hinting at the notion that connections between them might not be inevitable or simply apparent. This represents, as Deleuze has noted, a vision of the frame as “an opaque surface of information.”[92] The opaque and the saturated images are connected in an associative montage that complicates rather than forces meanings. Although, as theorists have argued, for Godard “montage is something cinema never achieved,”[93] the Hell sequence strides towards and also contemplates the possibility of that achievement. Here, Godard uncovers another dimension of war itself—as a spectacular display (of military powers, in particular). As Paul Virilio has argued in an analysis that focused on the use of perceptual (including cinematic) mechanisms for military purposes, the war machine can be seen as tied to the watching machine; both being susceptible to spectacle production (e.g. in particular in the cases of psychological warfare).[94] In a related metonymy of Godard’s own, war and theater become interchangeable:

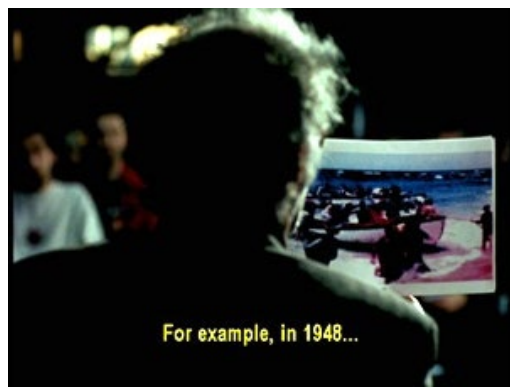
“War—the theater of operations—follows theater. And cinema follows war. In both instances, actors are gotten cheap and will have to pay for it.” [95]

In *Notre musique*, however, Godard’s cinema attempts forgiveness and overcoming, working through an Eisensteinian rhythmic and intellectual montage (“in which meaning emerges not in any shot but in the conflict *between* shots”)[96] of visuals in Hell, then reaching beyond the language of the spectacle in Purgatory. But the emphasis on spectacle is rendered inevitable in Hell—violence simply has to be displayed because the Hell of war is for Godard represented by the innocent victims.

Godard’s heroine asks in voiceover in Hell for these trespasses to be forgiven. In a possible interpretation, the notion of trespass (which also evokes the concept of property) here goes beyond the meaning in Christian prayer to refer not merely refer to the active sins of warriors but also of the sins of omission of the twentieth century perceptual machine—the cinema. The eyes of victims shun the camera, which cannot, morally and technically, become a genuine witness. As Giorgio Agamben has written of testimonies of Auschwitz survivors,

“At a certain point, it became clear that testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna: in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to.”[97]

Godard’s quest for pure images reaches its maximum in “Hell” at the cost of obviousness—if nothing can be “mirrored” all can still be shown. But this vision also questions Deleuze’s notion of the frame—it does not represent data in an abstract sense. It cannot be pure image because it is not the violence of warfare that cannot be represented but the sense of victimhood. *“The authority of witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak—*



that is, in his or her being a subject." [98] In Sontag's terms, these images are thus suggestive of what exceeds the ability of words to describe or in Henry James' phrase, exceed the endurance of thoughts. [99] We return to the images of women silently turning their eyes away from the camera. Godard seems to ask, "What does it mean to protest suffering, as distinct from acknowledging it?" [100]

Trespassing in Purgatory: cinema of border crossings



Godard leaves "pure images" safely confined to the Hell sequence. These images or, more broadly, relations between the documentary and fictional representations of war from Hell, take us to the Bosnian and Israeli-Palestinian Purgatory. The Bosnia of *Notre musique* is a post-war landscape in which several real and fictional characters seek to overcome divisions, including Israeli-Palestinian. Purgatory returns to narrative that is thus spatially bound in a "dynamic physical sense." [101]



Themes of borders, boundaries, and crossings are central to Purgatory from the very first set of shots that take place at the airport and in the passport control area. Virtually all the "characters" real or fictional cross actual or symbolic boundaries—Judith Lerner as a fictional Israeli journalist who searches for the meaning of reconciliation in Bosnia; the real-life poet Darwich whom she interviews; and the Spanish novelist Goytisolo who traverses the landscapes of conquest in Sarajevo. Of course, Godard himself appears in the film as the invitee to a literary conference in Sarajevo, and it is perhaps no accident that the film includes two translators as well—a Bosnian woman and a French-Israeli man. The latter translator offers an autobiographical account of his uneasy belonging to two countries with which Purgatory begins; in it, he underscores the reconciliatory potential of crossings, biographical and linguistic. The critical trope here is that of linguistic translation that can connect and prevail over divisions (even if not perhaps to form a union). Godard (who is Swiss by origin) seems to hope for a Babel that would be bound and not sundered by diversity. As he has stated of himself, "A language is obviously made to cross borders. I'm someone whose real country is language, and whose territory is movies." [102]



According to Rashid Khalidi, the quintessential Palestinian experience takes place at a border, an airport, a checkpoint—the places where "the six million Palestinians are signed out for 'special treatment' ... forcibly reminded of their identity." [103] The chief form of implementing forms of state control over territory involves control over its people through the formal markers of citizenship and belonging, such as the use of permits, registries, and identity cards. All Palestinians are issued an identity number by the Israel Ministry of the Interior, whose even lowest-ranking officers have access to personal information about residents of the territory not available to anyone else. Permits are needed for movement outside of the West Bank and Gaza, applications are necessary for family reunification and visa permits are required for travel; failure to present an ID to a soldier on duty is "punishable with up to one year's imprisonment;" [104] these strategies are explained by a former member of the Israeli Army as strategies of containment rather than control of the Palestinian people. [105] Nadia Abu-Zahra, based on her seven-year participant-observation and in-depth interviewing concludes that "ID cards have become a principal tool of coercion at the individual level, resulting in mass dispossession at the collective level." [106]



The arbitrariness of select metaphorical juxtapositions, such as the director's description of the Israeli narrative as fictional, and the Palestinian as a documentary (in both *Notre musique* and in his earlier *Histoire(s) du cinéma*), undermines the film's reconciliation narrative and has even prompted critics to accuse the auteur of anti-Semitism, although Godard has also, perhaps unsurprisingly, referred to himself as "the Jew of the cinema".

The point here is that military control operates not only through the visible presence of military control or specific interventions in land use, but also through the forms of administrative and police control, including the population census, personal ID cards, and various permits that limit population movement and have the consequence of infringing upon or denying basic civil or social rights.

The possible effect of these tactics evokes Steven Lukes' discussion of the third dimension of power according to which citizens can be disenfranchised to such an extent that they perceive even the powers that they do have as unattainable or impossible to transfer into social action.[107] The notion of asymmetric warfare[108] is important in understanding the shift from ground to air and "invisible occupation"[109] that followed the evacuation from the Gaza Strip on September 13, 2005. The spatial optic is crucial in that allows a replication of an extreme form of a modernist gaze over a clear territory, devoid of human life. The visual and other new technologies that allow for the new levels of military precision become a convenient tool for desensitization to violence on the part of the public. The war technologies are in this sense possibly dangerous tools for the legitimating of frequent use of military action on behalf of the state and political leadership.

Importantly, Godard films are preceded by a visa number. As in his *For Ever Mozart*, for example, the "trespass" in *Notre musique* is acknowledged by a numeric stamp on a cinematic passport over the black screen that precedes the film's title. A visa demarcates an outsider, sets limits to entry, to the purpose and the duration of visit. A film is an imaginary voyage, and Godard seeks a permit to guide the audience along many of its possible paths and trespasses. Or perhaps we can interpret this differently—a trespass is only a trespass and not merely a crossing because someone arbitrarily placed a fence, demarcated a territory, and placed an "entry forbidden" sign. As the director claimed at the Cannes press conference for the film, and as he also noted in an interview over twenty years ago, while he does understand frontiers, he doesn't approve of customs officers. [110]

Transferring this metaphor to the context of film art, "visa de censure" marks film as a "product" that conforms to prescribed norms set by the state (censorship rules and subsidies) and the market (art becomes commerce). Audiences are thus conditioned to a set of narrative and visual conventions that the filmmaker may be pressed to accommodate but that s/he needn't blindly follow. Certainly Godard's entire opus presents strong challenges to cinematic conventions, and in this way Godard's "form that thinks" has strived for a liberty not easily achieved. An ironic "footnote" after the visa number that begins Godard's film *Nouvelle vague* (1990), for example, includes a voiceover that states, "And I really meant it to be a narrative."

Godard redefined cinema in the 1960s by exaggerating his critical defect, his inability to tell a story, his conscious and unconscious rebellion against the narrative. But in his more recent works, as he acknowledged in conversation with Wim Wenders, Godard claims to have rediscovered "the charm of a conventional, linear narrative,"[111] although *Nouvelle vague* hardly conforms to narrative linearity and rather represents a contemplation of narrative genre possibilities. In *Notre musique*, the director quickly dispels the visa number mundanity with a dramatically high piano note that sounds an instant later, before the images of the Hell sequence overwhelm. As discussed, the horrors of warfare need to be represented as "pure images" inasmuch as this quest is ultimately implausible, but searches for reconciliation across state, cultural, and linguistic boundaries have to be narrated.

Narratives of the conquered and the conquerors commonly reveal the impossibility of union or of reconciliation. I take pause here to hint at anthropological evidence, given the not so well-known fact that Godard's own university degree was in ethnography. As Frederick Barth has written, an "ethnic *boundary* defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" and that these deeper boundaries "can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence."^[112] In cinematic terms, the emphasis on boundaries thus reveals the entrapment of otherness and difference: "a dichotomization of others as strangers, as members of another ethnic group, implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings."^[113]

Matthew Longo writes, "The border is a definitive marker of the political, defining in and out, friend and enemy, us and them"^[114] but the border should instead be the site that allows us to challenge these dichotomies. The border is a site of purging, a place where one must prove one's worth to enter; at the border "we also encounter our own foreignness."^[115] Not mere "line[s] of jurisdiction," borders are institutions, sites of state authority and control, sites of politics, of state violence.^[116] Borders are loci of power but also places "where states lose definition."^[117]

Cinema departs from these social and cultural realities yet it offers resembling realities of its own making. Godard's reply seems to be that to attempt reconciliation, the "I" first needs to understand the wounds of the "other." Postulating such a process is problematic in itself as the "I" and the "other" are positioned as opposing, radically different categories. Second, a meaningful encounter of the "I" with the "other" depends upon the ability to understand the self from the other's perspective. Such a stance allows for the possibility of connection. As Godard explains in his lecture within this film, relationships imply equality and reciprocity but not the identical image of the self reflected in the other, not the Howard Hawksian shot-reverse shot. Godard thus endorses an element of difference. A key point here is that although the relationship between the self and the other does not entail a mirror image, it nevertheless does not exclude commonality. Godard underscores this point with documentary images of war. He shows a black and white photograph of a ruined city and asks the Bosnian audience to identify the place. Berlin and Belfast are among the answers, yet the city turns out to be Richmond, Virginia, after the Civil War. In a similar take, photographs of the victims of the concentration camps labeled "Muselmann" and "Jewish," seem to suggest that the Jew and the Muslim become one and the same casualties. (Godard puns on the word Muselmann used to describe a ruined concentration camp victim).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



World War II as the past that transforms the present.



Judith Lerner observing a photograph of Hanna Arendt.



The sedimentation of the frame with past contexts in *Notre musique* has to be understood in relation to the urban ruins of Mostar and

Some “flattening” of perspective, however, does occur in *Purgatory* through the two-dimensional images that Godard presents in his lecture. In a sense this simplification becomes an asset as Godard manages to relate but not equate the wars in Bosnia with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But the set of sequences that juxtapose “I” and the “other,” emphasizing their difference, seems the weakest part of *Purgatory*, a place repeatedly shown as characterized by crossings. Yet here Godard’s visual and historical connections in fact seem to flow far too freely across the globe, even to Richmond, Virginia, as noted, and also far back in time. As John Lewis Gaddis has observed about historians, this is one possible interpretation of what they attempt to do when they “represent” the time long passed.[118] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Godard becomes a meta-historian here, using the cinematic tools at his disposal. As James S. Williams has perceptively noted, history equals montage to Godard, [119] and the power to reshape history through various forms of montage can all too easily become a top-down modernist drive or even a celestial calling. Thus paradoxically for Godard’s project, we return to the notion that engagement with the image can be a dismissal of politics, of history. Here lies a particular danger in emphasizing differences and meta-narratives; the discourse can easily slide into a one of essentialism and totalization. Thus the vision in Godard’s “lecture” sequence is the opposite of what Doane’s theory of cinematic contingency suggested—the possibilities for alternate histories or interpretations are here closed. An alternate interpretation of Godard’s “lecture” is suggested by Morgan who argues that Godard’s point is to examine not the ontology of the photographic image, but how the images can be used as reference points in particular contexts:

“Rather than taking photographic images to signify because of a causal relation to the world, Godard is concerned to show that there has always been a complicated relation between photography and reality, and that this relation is not given simply by the way light reacts on emulsion.”[120]

Williams recalls religious imagery in Godard’s recent work, especially Catholicism’s visual affinities that appeal to the artist, and provide an uneasy source of redemptive power. Such religious elements connoting the redemptive aspects of creation have indeed made critics of Godard’s work uneasy. What is at stake is a view of suffering as a form of transfiguration. As Sontag explains, following Bataille, “It is a view of suffering, of the pain of others, that is rooted in religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation.”[121] As Richard Combs and Raymond Durnat have pointed out:

“The need to invoke themes of redemption and resurrection—both to connect to the hallowed in Western art, and to seek cinema’s salvation after its abdication at the camps—has clearly taken [Godard] further. In the process, has he montaged himself with French Catholicism? Godard needed the camps, basically, so that cinema could be hurled into the pit and then become a candidate for resurrection.”[122]

In a tale of representations that Godard presents in *Notre musique*, a girl who witnessed an apparition of a Virgin Mary identifies a particular vision to match her own visionary experience of the Madonna out of many images she is shown. The well-known references here are to Bernadette and to the shrine in Lourdes. Shown a variety of images from Western art history (of one of the most commonly represented figures in western art in the Christian Era), the child finds an exact

Sarajevo.



The film's omission of any explanation of the contexts of the Bosnian warfare is striking. It represents the narrative equivalent of the opaque black frame, but as troubling as this notion might seem, Godard does not represent the conflict as unfathomable for the West.



In many of the sequences, in particular the repeated establishing shot of a commercial street at night, Sarajevo is not immediately definable except by signs in Bosnian. This kind of imagery represents the notion of the "deterritorialization" of the image in Deleuze's terms, presenting urban post-war ethnic conflict zones as a part of the global universe.

picture, suggesting that ordinary people "know" what they experience through artistic representations even when it is "divine." More importantly for Godard's lecture, the image Bernadette identifies is the Virgin of Cambrai. It is an icon—as Godard explains, it has no movement, no depth, it is simply the sacred (this would seem to say that cinema, which has movement and depth, cannot present the sacred).[123]

For Godard, there is commonness in devastation and hell, but there is particularity in beauty and heavenliness. This set of juxtapositions is "notre musique." The notes, the tunes, the rhythm bear the signature of a particular creator, the film author, yet the meanings of the work of art are multiple, "ours." Godard's art appears to exit the entrapment and also to endorse more than mere reflexivity, suggesting also that affect is experienced via music. The arbitrariness of select metaphorical juxtapositions, such as the director's description of the Israeli narrative as fictional, and the Palestinian as a documentary (in both *Notre musique* and in his earlier *Histoire(s) du cinéma*), however, undermines the film's reconciliation narrative and has even prompted critics to accuse the auteur of anti-Semitism,[124] although Godard has also, perhaps unsurprisingly, referred to himself as "the Jew of the cinema." [125]

Mediated crossings: real and cinematic bridges

If Hell responds to the crisis of representation of spectacle-war in film, Purgatory ties that crisis indirectly to the relation with media images of warfare. In theoretical terms, digital media adopt and reshape cinematic contingency as can be seen in

"the televisual obsession with the 'live' coverage of catastrophe [as] the ultimate representation of contingency, chance, and it the instantaneous, as well as [in] the logics of an Internet that promises to put diversity, singularity, and instantaneity more fully within our grasp." [126]

It is thus particularly striking that Purgatory is set in Bosnia and that one of "the main protagonists" (to the extent one can use that term for Godard's films) is a journalist. The international media extensively televised the wars of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. World audiences watched the atrocities as United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), formed in 1992 with the peacekeeping mandate, stood by without the mandate to intervene. As Susan Woodward writes about that moment,

"Continuing to view the conflict as irrelevant to their national interests and and collective security, Western leaders defined it as anachronistic, an unpleasant reminder of old ethnic and religious conflicts that modern Europe had left behind, rather than as a part of their own national competition to redefine Europe and respond to the end of the cold war." [127]

Citing Ron Haviv's photograph taken in Bijeljina, Bosnia in April 1992 of a "Serb militiaman casually kicking a dying Muslim woman in the head," Susan Sontag shows how photographs "became important in bolstering indignation at this war which had been far from inevitable, far from intractable; and could have been stopped much sooner." [128] In October 1993, Sontag, who generally seemed to overestimate the multiculturalism of a Bosnia she advocated for, wrote about her anti-war activism and her staging of *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo the same year. She had visited Bosnia eight times between 1993 and 1995 reporting "despair, indignation, disbelief, a lingering hope that continues." [129] She said of that experience that "never again doesn't mean anything anymore, does it" and argued in the same context "had there been cameras in Auschwitz it would not have happened." In 1993 she wrote,



Sarajevo market.



Female beggars with children in Bosnia.



The contemporary moment is rather saturated with the sedimentation of destruction and ruin, and thus the trajectories within it, those that chart possibilities for reconciliation, are constantly arising anew and also being limited by the histories of conflict.

"No longer can a writer consider that the imperative task is to bring the news to the outside world. The news is out. Plenty of excellent foreign journalists (most of them in favor of intervention, as am I [as was, equally prominently, the French public intellectual Bernard-Henry Lévy] have been reporting the lies and the slaughter since the beginning of the siege, while the decision of the western European powers and the United States not to intervene remains firm [NATO intervention in fact took place although only starting in 1995], thereby giving the victory to Serb fascism. I was not under the illusion that going to Sarajevo to direct a play would make me useful in the way I could be if I were a doctor or a water systems engineer. It would be a small contribution. But it was the only one of the three things I do—write, make films, and direct in the theater—which yields something that would exist only in Sarajevo, that would be made and consumed there." [130]

In the context of media reportage, Neven Andjelic has noted that Sarajevo "had additionally received unprecedented media attention during the siege of the city and thus became a symbol, especially among Western audiences, which 'resulted in appreciation and respect for Sarajevo's martyred citizens, with a degree of attentiveness not normally granted to inhabitants of the region.'" [131] Sontag reports,

"In Sarajevo in the years of the siege, it was not uncommon to hear, in the middle of a bombardment or a burst of sniper fire, a Sarajevan yelling at the photojournalists, who were easily recognizable by the equipment hanging round their necks, 'Are you waiting for a shell to go off so you can photograph some corpses?'" [132]

Mirjana Ristic writes about "spatial violence against non-military targets" in Sarajevo's 'Sniper Alley'— "the name that emerged in the world's media to describe a strip of urban space that was the most intensively attacked by snipers"—and about the residents' strategies of resistance. [133] Contemporary genocidal violence includes "deliberate attempts at uricide: the killing of cities and the devastation of their symbols and architectures of pluralism and cosmopolitanism." [134] Dzevad Karahasan, in his essay "Sarajevo, Exodus of A City," writing during the shelling of his city by the Serbian forces in 1993, contrasted the struggle between nationalism and pluralism. He explained to a French visitor in 1992 that it was more significant to save Sarajevo as a symbol of an embrace of different faiths gathered in one city than it was even to ensure the residents' plain survival. [135]

In the Yugoslavian conflict, the most brutal forms of image manipulations of suffering came from the local nationalists, particularly the Slobodan Milošević-controlled RTS Television. But the western media, which liberally took sides and called at different times for aid for each, contributed their own share of propaganda, even at times indulging in self-glorification over the process in which the West contributed to the destruction of the former Yugoslavia by both fueling and ignoring nationalisms.



Furthermore, contemporary genocidal violence includes, as Graham has argued, "deliberate attempts at uricide: the killing of cities and the devastation of their symbols and architectures of pluralism and cosmopolitanism".



As Shohat and Stam have pointed out, in the cinematic narratives about the developing world, the first world journalists and other "mediating character[s] initiate the spectator into otherized communities; Third World and minoritarian people, it is implied, are incapable of speaking for themselves."

Televised images of warfare have impacted both the visual styles and the narratives of war films. Significantly and perhaps unsurprisingly, the media "trespass" has become an important visual and narrative key in representations of "Balkan wars". Virtually all of the better known films that take up the theme of the Yugoslavian wars—including those by directors Michael Winterbottom (*Welcome to Sarajevo*), Danis Tanović (*No Man's Land*), Milcho Manchevski (*Before the Rain*), and Srdjan Dragojević (*Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flames*)—feature reporters, journalists, or photographers as main characters. The journalist/reporter figure[136] mediates between the cinematic narrative of "Balkan warfare" and the Western audiences. The term Balkan used here has the pejorative connotations that Maria Todorova has identified, drawing relations between Edward Saïd's orientalism and stereotypes of "Balkanism"[137] which in the context of cinematic representations can include "exotics, ambiguity, and Thirdworldization." [138]

If cinemas emerge following a historical upheaval, when as Witt has argued "a nation's self-image is absent, in question or under threat," [139] Balkan cinema exported to Western audiences encountered reception as laden with "phobic cultural phantasms" [140] as if impossible to fathom without the mediator characters. Gender has also played a pivotal role. Furthermore and importantly, as Dina Yordanova points out in *Cinema of Flames*, in Balkan film male-on-female violence that ranges from humiliation to rape is focused on leading a woman to a psychological breaking point rather than physically crushing her. [141] In the context of the Balkan cinema of the 1990s, the urban territory is largely male, rarely showing women in leading roles unless in roles where they play victims of violence (in contrast to Bosnian films such as *Grbavica* (2006, Jasmila Zbanic) and *Snow* (2008, Aida Begic)). Narratives of Serbian cinema following 2000 are, however, "controversially relying on the images and narratives of gender misogyny and the violence it produces and its victims." [142]

Notre musique's mediator protagonist explains this "seemingly inexplicable" warfare and even offers to the audience a direct commentary, a moral, or sets the parameters of irony and the absurd. The awareness of suffering is, moreover, constructed via mediator characters making warfare resemble a form of representation. [143] As Shohat and Stam have pointed out, in the cinematic narratives about the developing world, the first world journalists and other

"mediating character[s] initiate the spectator into otherized communities; Third World and minoritarian people, it is implied, are incapable of speaking for themselves." [144]

But this use of an 'othered' character may also imply that the discourse and rhetoric of minoritarian voices may in fact be totally ineffective or counterproductive in actually speaking to dominant or First World audiences. [145] In the context of the Balkans in film, however, such mediating characters are often themselves transformed by the process of conveying 'truths' of 'otherized' communities, making for both more complicated narratives of mediation and interchange than in films about colonized regions. This has also resulted in an over-reliance on mediation in war narratives and over-emphasis on Western perceptions of warfare. [146]

In Godard's film's Purgatory sequence, which represents the core of the film, the auteur offers thus far the most sophisticated take on the contemporary mediated narratives of war (at least in films set in the Balkans). In this sequence we also find narrative subversions, although perhaps not to the extent present in many of his more recent films (thus perhaps making *Notre musique* more "accessible" than many Godard films).



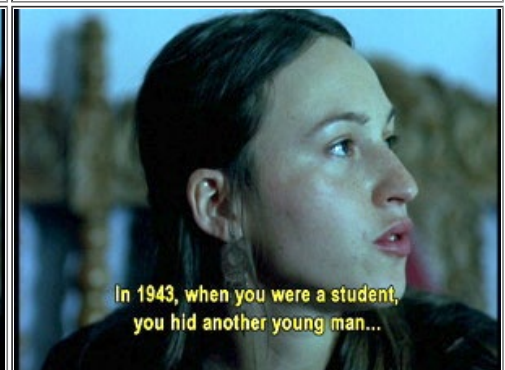
The main narrative strand follows Judith Lerner, the Israeli journalist for Haaretz who has come to Sarajevo and Mostar...

... "because of Palestine"...



... seeking to understand the nature of reconciliation. Judith (the film's center of consciousness) is in Bosnia looking for her own truth, not pretending to understand the reality of Bosnia.

And yet Judith also seems rather naïve or uninformed: e.g., the French ambassador explains the picture on the wall is of Hannah Arendt ...



... and remarks that she should read Arendt's work, which Judith apparently doesn't know.

Lanzmann (*Shoah*) argued that what is shown can only concern specific individuals at a specific moment. In Judith's searches, in her questions, ...



... in her calls for "just a conversation," Godard creates probably the most complex "mediator"

The ambassador whom she interviews rejected a tribute to his heroism for hiding a Jewish

character, at least in the context of the representations of the Balkans.

couple claiming that he only did what was "normal."

The main narrative strand, as has been noted, follows Judith Lerner, the Israeli journalist for *Haaretz* who has come to Sarajevo and Mostar “because of Palestine,” seeking to understand the nature of reconciliation. This notion would be rather cynically received in the Balkans, and especially in Bosnia, where tensions persist between former combatants. Godard overemphasizes the split in intentions as he transplants the Israeli Palestinian story to the context of the Bosnian war. That is, Judith (the film's center of consciousness) is in Bosnia looking for her own truth, not pretending to understand the reality of Bosnia. In her query and her efforts she is sincere and persistent—even as she is rebuffed, [147] she keeps searching.

In Judith’s searches, in her questions, in her calls for “just a conversation,” Godard creates probably the most complex “mediator” character, at least in the context of the representations of the Balkans. Although setting the film in the Balkans, Godard manages to downplay the narratives of patriotism and national belonging that are so common in films about war and reconciliation. This time, perhaps in a slightly mellowed approach, he also does not directly take up the themes of the West’s hypocrisy and duplicity as he does in *For Ever Mozart* or parts of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (although scenes set in the French Embassy in Sarajevo can be seen as a form of such critique).

And yet Judith also seems rather naïve or uninformed: e.g., the French ambassador explains the picture on the wall is of Hannah Arendt and remarks that she should read Arendt’s work, which she apparently doesn't know.[148] Neither Judith nor Godard and his other fellow travelers in Purgatory pretend to unmask the truth of Bosnia or the Balkans. Rather, the deliberate emphasis placed on multiple crossings and attempts at reconciliation demonstrates both empathetic engagement and reflexive detachment of the “mediator character,” conveyed with fine distinction by Sarah Adler. As much as Godard’s detachment from the Bosnian context in *Notre musique* is symbolic and withdrawn, Judith’s crossings are humble, unassuming, and tangible as she merely searches along a path which the audience is gently instructed to follow.





Neither Judith nor Godard and his other fellow travelers in Purgatory pretend to unmask the truth of Bosnia or the Balkans.



Rather, the deliberate emphasis placed on multiple crossings and attempts at reconciliation demonstrates both the empathetic engagement and the reflexive detachment of the “mediator character,” conveyed well by Sarah Adler.



Judith’s crossings are humble and unassuming, as she merely searches along a path which the audience is gently instructed to follow.

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| <p>The Bosnian interpreter and the crew's driver speak in un-translated Bosnian about their evening plans.</p> | <p>The two simultaneous truths reveal the ambiguous meanings of Purgatory through these juxtapositions. The city is wounded but the people seek to move on; neither reality appears complete without the other.</p> |

The emphasis on crossings and mediation leaves the narrative of the actual Bosnian war outside the representational sphere of Purgatory. The cinema of reflexivity assumes the responsibility of knowledge. Yet Godard does not, in Sontag's terms, seem to say, "one should feel obligated to think" about these images.[149] "The task of the spectator," according to Godard, writes Michael Witt, "is not necessarily that of understanding, but rather of hearing, receiving, and 'seeing' the effects of his comprehensions and concatenation of his disparate source materials in the intuitive, emotional, and visceral way one might experience a piece of music." [150] Film has the capacity to call upon social responsibility because it can select from the archives of history the forgotten images and the suppressed stories,[151] although unlike Alain Resnais in *Hiroshima mon amour* Godard is not interested in exploring the buried layers of the traumatic pasts. The sedimentation of the frame with past contexts in *Notre musique* has to be understood in relation to the urban ruins of Mostar and Sarajevo. The film's omission of any explanation of the contexts of the Bosnian warfare is striking. It represents the narrative equivalent of the opaque black frame, but as troubling as this notion might seem, the conflict is not represented as unfathomable for the West.



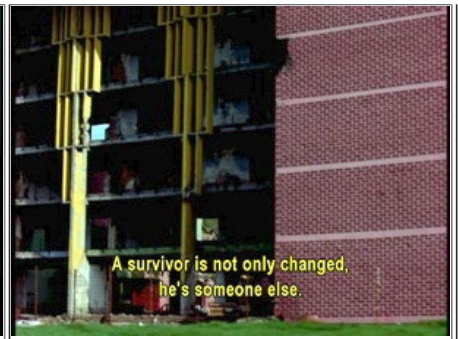
Goytisolo, Godard, and their fellow travelers stress that the scars of war never go away, that the survivor's identity is irrevocably altered by war ("Violence leaves a deep scar... The trust in the world that terror destroys is irretrievable").

Godard explored the perversity, cruelty and the horror of the Bosnian war in *For Ever Mozart*, a film that treats the theme of European guilt and responsibility. In that film, a high-minded French theater troupe falls prey to the Bosnian Serbs and experiences the types of humiliation that the Western European intelligentsia watched on TV, comfortably situated, a contrast that the film also emphasizes. In the film, Godard cites Goytisolo's words: "the history of Europe in 1990s is a single rehearsal with slight symphonic variations of the cowardice and chaos of the 1930s."

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In this “saturated frame, the urban ruin in the background is always at the same time a part of the foreground.



Further, the visual saturation overwhelms the exchange in multiple languages shot in medium close-up in a moving car, suggesting that boundaries are in the process of being crossed.

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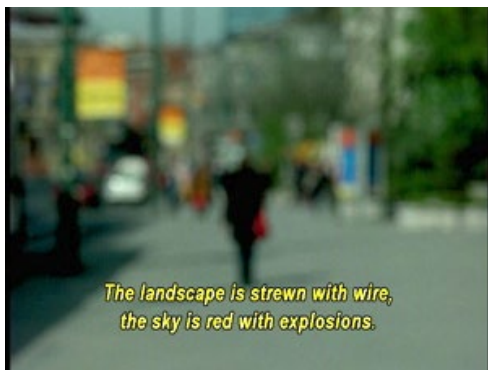
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



It would thus be rather surprising that Godard would seek hopefulness in Purgatory in the wounded cities of Sarajevo and Mostar, yet in several sequences Godard presents multiple juxtapositions in which amidst the ruins and the rubble of war, shelled buildings and skeleton ghost of the national library, Sarajevans are yearning to overcome. The film abounds with images of Sarajevo, its trams, streets, markets, and commercial billboards advertising western imports and domestic products. In many of the sequences, in particular the repeated establishing shot of a commercial street at night, Sarajevo is not immediately definable except by signs in Bosnian. This kind of imagery represents the notion of the “deterritorialization” of the image in Deleuze’s terms, presenting urban post-war ethnic conflict zones as a part of the global universe.



Landscapes of loss: Purgatory as a state of life amidst endless threat of terror.

In the introductory sequences in Purgatory, Goytisolo, Godard, and their fellow travelers stress that the scars of war never go away, that the survivor’s identity is irrevocably altered by war (“Violence leaves a deep scar... The trust in the world that terror destroys is irretrievable.”). At the same time, the Bosnian interpreter and the crew’s driver speak in un-translated Bosnian about their evening plans. The two simultaneous truths reveal the ambiguous meanings of Purgatory through these juxtapositions. The city is wounded but the people are looking to move on; neither reality appears complete without the other. In this saturated frame, the urban ruin in the background is always at the same time a part of the foreground. Further, the visual saturation overwhelms the exchange in multiple languages shot in medium close-up in a moving car, suggesting that boundaries are in the process of being crossed. In *For Ever Mozart*, similarly, the cityscape observed from the moving train at dusk during rain links to the narrative of warfare and loss. As Sontag has observed, “sheared-off building are almost as eloquent as body parts—Look, ... this is what war *does* ... War ruins”[152] [\[open endnotes in new page\]](#) The landscape that Godard records takes on a narrative burden and is coded as “history.”



In Mostar, Godard’s camera shoots a beautiful sequence of the rebuilt sixteenth-century bridge over the river Neretva, destroyed by Croatian forces in 1993, and reconstructed in 2004.



The bridge leitmotif, most closely associated with the literary opus of the Nobel prizewinner of the former Yugoslavia, Ivo Andrić, is a dominant, recurrent metaphor in Balkan literature and film. Bosnian bridges symbolize the crossroads of the Orient and the Occident; the destruction of the Mostar bridge denotes the impossibility of coexistence in the Balkans.



The meaning of the bridge, however, is perhaps recaptured through history lessons and songs that children in local schools are studying.



The stones were salvaged in two phases.



In *Notre musique*, we watch the painstaking efforts by the real-life French architect in charge of the rebuilding, Gilles Pecqueux, to recreate...

...stone after stone, the old bridge.



This connection between past and future, in which tragedies are not erased but the future is not forsaken either, lies at the heart of the film's perhaps too-hopeful call for reconciliation. Godard presents a beautiful and seemingly effortless series of shots of Judith observing and photographing the bridge.

In Mostar, Godard's camera shoots a beautiful sequence of the rebuilt sixteenth-century bridge over the river Neretva, destroyed by Croatian forces in 1993, and reconstructed in 2004. The bridge leitmotif, most closely associated with the literary opus of the former Yugoslavian Nobel prizewinner Ivo Andrić, is a dominant, recurrent metaphor in Balkan literature and film. Bosnian bridges symbolize the crossroads of the Orient and the Occident; the destruction of the Mostar bridge denotes the impossibility of coexistence in the Balkans. In *Notre musique*, we watch the painstaking efforts by the real-life French architect in charge of the rebuilding, Gilles Pecqueux, to recreate, stone after stone, the old bridge. Absent from view is the city of Mostar itself, whose neighborhoods are not the subject of such painstaking reconstruction since resources and foreign aid have been poured mostly into the reconstruction of the symbolic bridge to the neglect of the rest of the city. The meaning of the bridge, however, is perhaps recaptured through history lessons and songs that children in local schools are studying. Godard's camera, in a modest low angle, manages to record with minimal intrusion. Here, again the visual frame delivers one story, while the linguistic translation motif probes possibilities for reconciliation.

In an insensitive and offensive European stereotyping that goes back to the noble savage fantasy of Rousseau (also a Swiss intellectual), fictional Native Americans stand by watching too, as the camera retreats behind them, perhaps to reflect further. At one point, Native Americans spontaneously jump on a pickup truck and leave the screen.[153] Stuart Klawans argued that this was deliberate:

"their estrangement from the proceedings of the [Sarajevo] conference is precisely the justification for their presence in the film. They offer a true (rather than ostensible) opposite in the montage—or, if you prefer, the dialectic.. [I]f you're going to have U.S. Navy sailors in the "Heaven" section, you really ought to have Native Americans in "Purgatory." [154]



Godard falters in representations of Native American Indians, a stereotype suggestive of white European fantasy of the First Nations. Yet the Mostar bridge in *Notre musique* is also, as J. Hoberman pointed out, a metaphor for [a form of] montage and in a sense for Godard's cinema.

Brody finds that Godard credits "the Palestinian writer [and a negotiator for PLO] Elias Sanbar, who had written about Native Americans in his own work, as the film's 'memory'... Godard's allusion in *Notre musique* to Sanbar's view suggests his endorsement of the idea that Israel and the United States, among other nations, developed by conquest and forced displacement, and were thus fundamentally illegitimate and tainted." [155] Nevertheless, the deeply flawed presence of Native American appears as an obtrusive, gratuitous, and insensitive cultural appropriation.

Wars are fought over territory; the belligerent, imposing, and arrogant conquerors claiming they are entitled to demolish the conquered physical structure and to erase civilization, as much as to oppress or exterminate the population: so many



Sarajevo National Library



The sequences set in the Sarajevo library where, Brody notes, "two million books had been destroyed in the bombing though the building's stone shell remained standing," present, as a protagonist utters in *For Ever Mozart*, "the defeat of intelligence."

bridges were destroyed and so many bridges were not built. The Mostar bridge in *Notre musique* is also, as J. Hoberman pointed out, a metaphor for [a form of] montage and in a sense for Godard's cinema.[156] Godard applies the term montage "not only to the relationships internal to cinema, but also to a far broader set of social, political, and even existential relations that are established and revealed through cinema." [157] Cinema is thus the bridge, the invisible connection, between the two, a juxtaposition, between the documentary and the fictional. As Klawans has written, "The great trial of this 'Purgatory,' then, is to recognize the other person and not just oneself; [...] to locate the opposite riverbank so we can begin rebuilding the bridge." [158-159]

Godard spoke in an interview on *Notre musique* in such a lamenting tone that he revealed his own yearning for bridges through his mediated connection to wounded cities, exiles places, and post-war zones:

"Places like Sarajevo, Bosnia, or Palestine are also a little bit of a metaphor for what the cinema has become for me, French cinema at least: a country still heavily dependent on subsidies, that can't survive by itself, that is under attack by the various forms of organized crime, that is drifting into prostitution. Cinema is an occupied country with a governor [...] Palestine, Sarajevo, the current cinema, these are all places of exile-which is good for me because I've always felt profoundly exiled [...] So I like going where no one else does. Before '68, everyone went to Cuba. But I went much later, when nobody was interested in it anymore." [160]

According to Koch, Kracauer, "an extraterritorial observer" [161] has linked the figure of the historiographer with that of an exile:

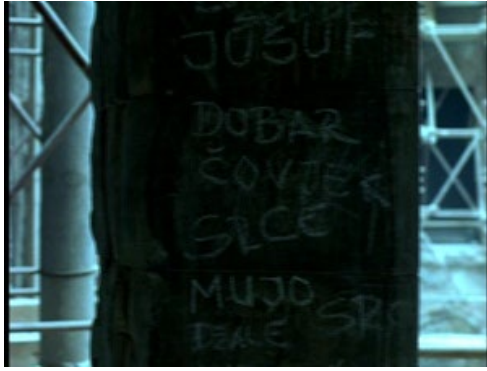
"The impossibility of reconstructing history as that logical discourse of chronological time that can be subsumed under a general principle that engenders the image of a discontinuous world of ruptures and rejections, whose chronicler can only be a survivor who has passed through the cataracts of time unscathed." [162]

As Godard can perhaps be reminded, Kracauer's reference is to the historical figure of Ahaseurus, the Wandering Jew. [163] Godard endorses also a view of cinema of the margins, of homelessness:

"I wanted the film to bear the trace of the Israel-Palestine conflict, a conflict I have felt close to for a long time, together with Anne-Marie Miéville... As marginals, expelled from our cinematic garden by what is called the American cinema, I feel close to them, the Vietnamese, the Palestinians... As creators, we have become homeless. For a long time I said that I was on the margin, but that the margin is what holds the pages together. Today I have fallen from that margin, I feel that I'm in between the pages." [164]

According to Michael Witt, his togetherness with Anne-Marie Miéville should be seen as a genuine collaboration, especially given the absolute centrality of her role in Godard's work since the 1970s. [165]

Although Godard in a lecture that he delivers in the film pays an unspoken homage to Kracauer's quest for redemption of physical reality, he nevertheless challenges Kracauer's focus on the material by tying the redemptive capacity to the sublime. More significantly, through complex metaphors of border-crossings, multiple attempts at dialogue among his real and fictional protagonists, and using several different languages within speech, Godard seeks transformative pathways within the historical engagement. The cities of Sarajevo and Mostar represent the critical arena in which Godard explores transformative trajectories of the



Godard frames a gray pillar on which shaky handwriting has noted Bosnian names in white chalk and the words "dobar covjek" ("a good man"), perhaps to compensate for the absence of books, to underscore the need for learning and understanding.

cinematic engagement with history and history of representation. Bosnian cities become complex settings for visions of border crossings, attempts—failed and successful—for dialogue among strangers, foreigners, and local residents. The sequences set in the Sarajevo library ("where two million books had been destroyed in the bombing though the building's stone shell remained standing" [166]) present, as a protagonist utters in *For Ever Mozart*, "the defeat of intelligence," that is, the difficulty of dialogue. Godard frames a gray pillar on which children's shaky handwriting has noted Bosnian names in white chalk, perhaps to compensate for the absence of books, to underscore the need for learning. The narrative struggles here as the setting entombs the protagonists in a cinematic uncanny. In contrast, in the outdoor sequences, Sarajevo and Mostar become arenas of a global cinema that at once seeks to learn the lessons from the Balkans and also, by relating other contexts of conflict (Israel and Palestine in particular), engages in the process of de-particularization of the conflict.



Native American Indians condemn the white scholar in the empty shell of the Sarajevo national library.



"The White Man Will Never Understand the Ancient Words Here in Spirits Roaming Free Between the Sky and the Trees."



A Bosnian woman returning a book to the empty library.



Cinema and library as sources of light.

The out-of-field space and the Heavenly protectorate

But Godard does not leave us there, too optimistic or too lulled in hopefulness. Indeed, in response to Godard's evocation of libraries, Goytisolo remarks that humane people also create cemeteries. The act of creation, ironic juxtapositions notwithstanding, is too often in Godard's visions construed as heroic (hence the occasional aloof pre-eminence of his oeuvre), and as has been noted, war narratives crave heroes. Perhaps one of the greatest oversimplifications of war narratives is the reduction of war victory to heroism as Godard's *Les Carabiniers* has shown.





An unusual, beautiful yet unsettling heroine Olga, who is also Judith's metaphorical double.



The absurdness of Olga's death, her indifference to human casualties as she simply enacted "suicide by police" in which she was the only casualty...



...seems to undermine the redemptive thread of the film.



Olga staged a suicide mission in a Jerusalem cinema, in which she asked at least one fellow Jew to sacrifice their life for peace. No one volunteered; she was killed by the police.



Yet Olga's call was a rhetorical bluff. She said she had a bomb in her bag; in truth, she only had books.

In the universe of *Notre musique*, we find an unusual, beautiful yet unsettling heroine in Olga, who is also Judith's metaphorical double. As her uncle recounts to Godard in a phone conversation at the end of *Purgatory*, Olga staged a suicide mission in a Jerusalem cinema, in which she asked at least one fellow Jew to sacrifice their life for peace. No one volunteered; she was killed by the police. Yet her call was a rhetorical bluff. She said she had a bomb in her bag; in truth, she only had books. Godard's montage presents stills from a fictional "documentary" news report. Her ultimate heroism becomes an opposition to the nationalism and blindness of one's own group and in this we can find an affirmative moral stand. Susan Sontag asserts,

"The destructiveness of war—short of total destruction, which is not war but suicide—is not in itself an argument against waging war unless one thinks (as few people actually do think) that violence is always unjustifiable, that force is always and in all circumstances wrong—wrong because, as Simone Weil affirms in her sublime essay on war, 'The Iliad, or The Poem of Force' (1940), violence turns anybody subjected to it into a thing. No, retort those who in a given situation see no alternative to armed struggle, violence can exalt someone subjected to it into a martyr or a hero." [167]

But the absurdness of Olga's death, her indifference to human casualties as she simply enacted "suicide by police" in which she was the only casualty, seems to undermine the redemptive thread of the film.

Where other filmic war narratives would forge heroism through displays of masculinity, Godard assigns agency to a female martyr, with whom he identifies. The female experience and understanding of war represent an important part of the film, underscored by Judith's and Olga's stories in *Purgatory*, and by the

endings of all three parts. In Hell, sequences with women soldiers and victims follow after we have seen all unimaginable and imagined cruelties (Godard thus does not identify women in simplistic terms only as victims as a typical war film would). The close-up of women's faces avoiding the camera appears at the very end of Hell. In Purgatory, the last image we see is of a dead female body, presumably that of Olga, and final section of the film, Heaven, ends with a close-up of her face. If Godard's cinema is a cinema of resistance, Judith's and in part Olga's characters bring it to life, even if Olga has to die. A close up of her face ends the film. She closes her eyes, reminding us again of the void, silence, and black frames between images—the moments in which motion pictures create meanings or in Godard's cinema resist the inevitability of meanings. Godard seems to wish that the viewer would make this connection, perhaps an example of the Deleuzian "out of frame." As Deleuze notes, out-of-field contains two different aspects:

"a relative aspect by which a closed system refers in space to a set which is not seen, and which can in turn be seen, even if this gives rise to a new unseen set, on to infinity; and an absolute aspect by which the closed system opens onto a duration which is immanent to the whole universe, which is no longer a set and does not belong to the order of the visible." [168]

Perhaps the simplest explanation is that this image, anticipated at the end, is a mental image—our imagination of what Olga might be visualizing with her eyes closed. Cinema thus returns to the viewer, and *Notre musique* as a war film poses questions to the audience to "try to see" and "try to imagine" peace and reconciliation via Olga's and Judith's quests, as Godard persistently uses the symbolic images of women posited against and placed amidst warfare. Sontag asks, "Is there an antidote to the perennial seductiveness of war? And is this a question a woman is more likely to pose than a man? (Probably yes.)" [169]

As powerful as this notion is, it also signifies lament in *Notre musique*. Godard's siding with Olga's mission provides for a touching cinematic and personal resonance. Nade Dieu's resemblance to the Anna Karina of *Bande à part* (1964) is thus not really physical but rather lies in the spirit of Godard's filmmaking; as his camera tracks Olga running through Sarajevo, or when he shoots in close-up her ironic justifications: "Someone actually understood me? Perhaps it was because I wasn't clear," Olga declares. It is no accident that Olga's sacrifice mission occurs in a cinema and that she is abandoned and killed there. Having abandoned the quest for the "visible," having sacrificed Olga at the film's end, and closed her eyes in the last shot, cinema has ceased to represent a revolutionary space and today has no movement comparable to nouvelle vague's revolutionizing of film. Fictional Olga leaves behind a digital film labeled "Notre musique," bequeathed to the real Godard in Sarajevo. In one possible interpretation, Godard's film is her film. Perhaps this is Godard's response to the digital challenge (even if this is beyond the scope of this essay—this subject is tackled, however, by Niels Niessen who argues that "Notre musique seems to suggest that the only way the question of cinema's future can be addressed is through cinema itself." [170]) In Doane's theoretical terms,

"cinophilia could not be revived at this juncture were the cinema not threatened by the accelerating development of new electronic and digital forms of media." [171]

But also Godard has always endorsed multi-dimensional and hybrid forms, and that many of his films are complex collages of art forms. [172] In another possible interpretation in the context of *Notre musique*'s narrative, this vision of cinema as the "forgotten" revolutionary space gives up on the promise of the cinematic bridges of Purgatory. Godard provides an ironic response in Heaven to which Olga is sentenced.



The Heaven in which Olga finds herself is a deliberately nonsensical yet not completely absurd U.S. protectorate of cinema.



Martyred Olga is saved and walking around in a wooded island in springtime guarded by U.S. Navy (the soundtrack at one point includes part of the "Marine's Hymn").



In the last sequence a U.S. Navy sailor literally stamps Olga's arm with a virtual seal of approval as if to acknowledge her final redemptive journey into a protectorate or a rather unusual Heaven. The edenic wooded paradisiacal island, a place of nostalgia and not a social space, is a landscape in which leaves the audience puzzled and unsettled.



Having abandoned the quest for the "visible," having sacrificed Olga at the film's end, and closed her eyes in the last shot, cinema has ceased to represent a revolutionary space and today has no movement comparable to nouvelle vague's revolutionizing of film.

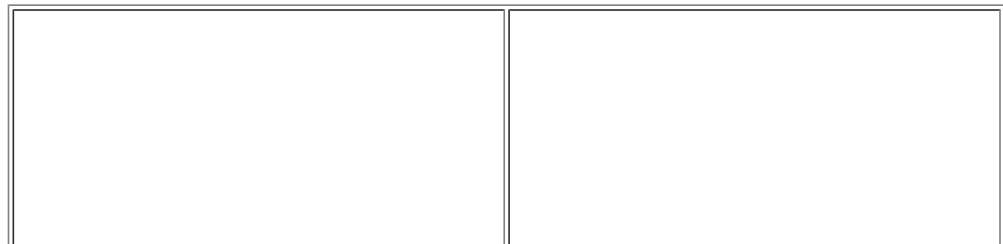


The meanings of *Notre musique* thrive in their complexities and overcome some of the simplistic symmetries. The West has yet to come to terms with the scale of destruction it caused, as can be seen in the film in Goytisolo's accounts and in the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's interview.

The Heaven in which Olga finds herself is a deliberately nonsensical yet not completely absurd U.S. protectorate of cinema—"supreme aspiration and an impossibility, a repository of history and intimate memory in an age of celebrity and forgetting." [173] The edenic wooded paradisiacal island, a place of nostalgia and not a social space, is a landscape in which Godard leaves the audience puzzled and unsettled. Olga seems free and redeemed, yet the absence of project or purpose renders the fictional reality untenable. The ending makes no sense, perhaps as much as Heaven makes little sense to Sarajevans who have survived Hell. [174]

But Godard still searches for a "political hope" in film, a cinema of political engagement and commitment. As Morgan puts it:

"In *Notre musique* over a shot of a swinging lightbulb—an image recalling both *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Alphaville* (1965)—Godard declares that "the principle of cinema [is to] go towards the light and shine it on our night." [175]





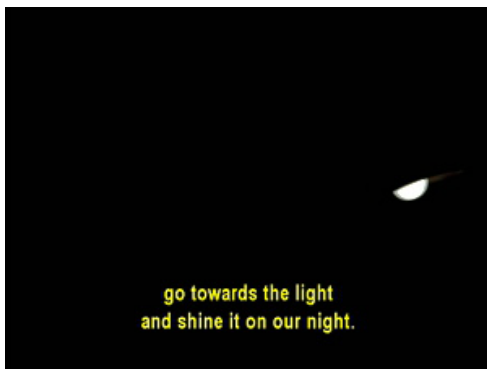
Yet the defeat in poetry is the only real defeat, Darwich tells to Lerner's journalist.



Darwich tells Judith Lerner, "we are fortunate to have Israel as an enemy.... the world is interested in you, not in us."



In *Notre musique* over a shot of a swinging lightbulb—an image recalling both *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Alphaville* (1965)...



...Godard declares that "the principle of cinema [is to] go towards the light and shine it on our night." [135]

In his narratives and visuals of crossings and trespasses, Godard's funerary art of mourning and of struggle against historical amnesia—cinema of constant reinvention—seeks reconciliation and the overcoming of devastation, but it falters in stark juxtapositions of the "I" and "the other" and arbitrariness of too many flattening comparisons. As Matthew Longo reminds us in *The Politics of Borders*, "Rather than take as assumption any us/them dichotomy proffered by borders, we should question the internal homogeneity of these categories." [176]

But the meanings of *Notre musique* thrive in their complexities and overcome some of the simplistic symmetries. The West has yet to come to terms with the scale of destruction it caused, as can be seen in the film in Goytisolo's accounts and in the Palestinian poet's interview. The defeat in poetry is the only real defeat, Darwich tells to Lerner's journalist. Godard seeks the role of artistic creation in recovery and healing, but he is also weary of the fact that this might mean the endorsement of ethno- or euro-centricity—e.g. in the way that he has Native American Indians condemn the white scholar in the empty shell of the Sarajevo national library. In a way, Godard, the expert on reversals, subverts himself yet again by both endorsing the act of creation and condemning its arrogance. In this context, his choice (as a "Western-European artist") of post-war Bosnia as a setting for this quest of reconciliation and redemption is at once both humble and daring.

While Godard undertakes the project of confronting historical narrative in his other films as well, in *Notre musique*, he does so by taking the cinematic quest to conquer history differently. Godard is no longer simply interested in rewriting history from the point of view of film, as in *Historie de Cinema*. He no longer examines merely the multiplicities of history within the multiplicities of narrative. He is not concerned with what cannot be narrated as in *Prénom Carmen* or *Nouvelle Vague*. Rather, he is seeking the transformative potential that can stem from the interaction between cinematic engagement with the histories of ethnic conflict as well as the histories of their representation. The transformative capacities of both cinema and life in post-conflict zones can be discerned in Godard's framing and juxtaposing history of the present-time lived experience with representations of warfare. Cinema and representations of war possess a dual connectivity of spectacle forged also through trespasses onto illicit territories. In the strongest sequences of *Purgatory*, Godard completes the trajectory of his visual and narrative engagement with war in film and leaves enough hope for bridges within a future cinema of reconciliation.

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Notes

Acknowledgements: For helpful comments and/or encouragement, recently and in the past, I wish to thank Ira Katznelson, Stuart Klawans, and Sam Ishii-Gonzales, as well as the peer reviewers and editors of *Jump Cut*, especially the late Chuck Kleinhans.

1. This aspect, the most evident in the Hell section of the film, is similar to Resnais' documentary sequences in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. [[return to text](#)]

2. While there are many different types of montage in film (as well as in Godard's opus in general and in *Notre musique* in particular), I emphasize in this article the notion of montage as a "bridge" between cinematic image opposites. Godard himself posits this notion implicitly in his lecture on 'reverse shots' in the film, and he visualizes it metaphorically in the Mostar sequence that queries the possibilities for reconciliation in Bosnia.

3. I refer here to Mary Ann Doane's reflections upon Miriam Hansen's interpretation of Kracauer's film theory. See, Mary Ann Doane, "The Object of Theory," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 88, Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

4. I agree with Jeffrey Skoller who notes that the image, following Bergson, could be seen as a half way between thing and representation which "gives cinema the complex layered quality as something that indexically simulates the visible work and also have the potential to open beyond itself." Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. XXI. I opted for the term *representations* which seemed to me closer to Godard's engagement with, and critique of, the moving image, its production of historical knowledge, and its archival role of "preserving [and coming to terms with] the horrors of the world" (Daniel Morgan, *Late Godard and the possibilities of cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 185. This concept is, I hope, sufficiently broad to include Godard's notion that the function of cinema is to be "truer than life"; Godard seeks not to represent but to transfigure reality (Michael Witt, *Jean-Luc Godard, cinema historian* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 26.

Godard's move away from indexicality is discussed by Daniel Morgan who argues that in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* Godard posits that "cinema needs to learn how to think about history and to do so without drawing on the guarantee that photographic indexicality provides" (Ibid., p. 166). But Morgan also cites Wright who argued that Godard's work is concerned with the "sublime recognition of the impossibility of doing justice to reality"; "the absence ... haunts every film image, i.e. the traumatic kernel of the Real" (Ibid., p. 181). I analyse "traumatic kernel of the Real" here in the context of *Notre musique's* cinema of an (im)possibility of reconciliation.

5. Cinematic experience is thus linked to the social forces in which it is produced. The role of Brechtian spectatorship is crucial here as the spectator is not a mere observer but possesses a capacity for action. Cited in *Shadows, Specters, Shards*, p. XXI.

6. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.), pp. 2-3, 22, 30.

7. Ibid., p. 107.

8. Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 38.

9. Ibid., p. 39.

10. Cited in Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, p. 4.

11. Bruce Bennett, "The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive" [book review] *Screen*, Winter 2004, Vol. 45, No. 4, p. 464.

12. Hansen, *Cinema and experience*, p. 18.

13. Ibid., p. 9.

14. Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 104, 106 [italics in the original].

15. Daniel Morgan, *Late Godard and the possibilities of cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 152.

16. Ibid., p. 167.

17. Ibid., p. 178.

18. Hansen, *Cinema and experience*, p. IX; see also 255.

19. Ibid., p. 5.

20. Ibid., p. 6.

21. Ibid., p. 6.

22. Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 113.

23. Hansen, *Cinema and experience*, p. 10.

24. Ibid., p. 12-13, 15.

25. Ibid., p. 258.

26. Ibid., p. 257.

27. Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 107.

28. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

29. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 68.

https://monoskop.org/images/a/a6/Sontag_Susan_2003_

30. Insdorf questions Kracauer's view expressed in the previous sentence. See, Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. xviii.
31. Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
32. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 11.
33. Benjamin de Carvalho and Andreas Behnke, "Shooting War: International Relations and the Cinematic Representation of Warfare," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 3 (2006): p. 935.
34. Quoted in Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, p. 280.
35. Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, Morningside ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 177-79.
36. See, Doane, "The Object of Theory."
37. See Chapter One in Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film*.
38. Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards*, p. XV.
39. Ibid., p. XV, XVI.
40. Ibid., p. XIX.
41. Ibid., p. XX.
42. Ibid., p. XXXIV.
43. Ibid., p. XXXVI.
44. Ibid., p. XXXIV.
45. See the following:
- Junji Hori, "Godard's Two Historiographies," in *For Ever Godard*, ed. James S. Williams, Michael Temple, and Michael Witt (London: Black Dog, 2004), p. 345;
 - Colin MacCabe and Sally Shafto, *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy*, 1st American ed. (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2004), p. 299;
 - Libby Saxton, "Anamnesis and Bearing Witness: Godard/Lanzmann," in *For Ever Godard*, ed. James S. Williams, Michael Temple, and Michael Witt (London: Black Dog, 2004), p. 364;
 - James S. Williams, "European Culture and Artistic Resistance in Histoire(S) Du Cinéma Chapter 3a, La Monnaie De L'absolu," in *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard, 1985-2000*, ed. Michael Temple and James S. Williams (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000).
46. Daniel Morgan stresses as well that, according to Godard, cinema failed to make properly understood the events of the 1930s and failed to record the Holocaust (See, Morgan, *Late Godard and the possibilities of cinema*, pp. 168, 179).

47. This is most clearly revealed in a number of explicitly political films that Godard made in the late 1960s and early 1970s in collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin, as a member of the radical Dziga Vertov group—arguably, not Godard’s strongest artistic phase. Indeed, recognizing this, Godard has offered a gender-conscious, and in part more politically savvy, corrective in *Ici et ailleurs* and especially in *Numéro deux* (1975). *Ici et ailleurs* credits Miéville as one of the makers, and *Numéro Deux* is especially linked to her creative presence in their work at this stage, her bringing her daughter into the household arrangement, etc. (I thank the editor for this note). In the latter film which focuses on labor and family, the narrator (Sandrine Battistella) condemns “the masculine perversion of violence [as] the fundamental factor in a woman’s degradation.” This is followed by intertitles that flash the words MUSIQUE, POLITIQUE, HISTOIRE, CINEMA.

48. Morgan, *Late Godard and the possibilities of cinema*, pp. 179-180.

49. Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 180.

50. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 66.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

52. More recently, Coppola’s anti-war film has seen a horrid revival in Anthony Swofford’s well publicized memoir turned into a screenplay for the film *Jarhead* (2005). Swofford, a Marine sniper veteran in the Gulf War depicted the Valkyrie sequence of *Apocalypse Now* as a form of “military pornography,” a powerful set of visuals used to at once desensitize soldiers for warfare and to arouse them to the state of preparedness for mass-slaughter. See, Manohla Dargis, “Behind Foreign Lines,” *New York Times Magazine* (2005), Lawrence Weschler, “Valkyries over Iraq: The Trouble with War Movies,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 2005 2005, pp. 65-67, 69.

53. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 63.

54. Weschler, for example, cites Samuel Fuller’s sarcastic remark that for the reality of war to be evoked truthfully, “bullets would need to be spraying out from the screen, taking out members of the audience at random, one by one, in scattershot carnage.” Weschler, “Valkyries over Iraq: The Trouble with War Movies,” p. 77.

55. Mark Peranson, “Notre Musique,” *Cineaste* 30, no. 2 (2005): p. 54.

56. For example, what is the extent of cinema’s capacity to record and reflect upon images of utmost horror? How meaningful are these representations to modern audiences desensitized by constant televised coverage of human suffering? How can (Western) cinema construct the meaning of transnational reconciliation to address its prior silences and its retreat in the face of the spectacular powers of Hollywood and global media?

57. See, Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London ; New York: Verso, 1990), Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

58. Godard has used these techniques to challenge other mainstream genre forms (for instance, in his well-known films, *À bout de souffle* (1960), *Vivre sa vie* (1962), *Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* (1965)), and decades ago, in *Les Carabiniers*, he applied them to shoot down mainstream war film.

59. David Sterritt, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible*, Cambridge Film Classics (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 16-17.

60. Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 193. [[return to page 2](#)]

61. *Les Carabiniers*, it should be noted, presents an insightful critique, much ahead of its time, of the role of image-driven culture in the sequence in which Ulysses and Michael-Ange bring home a war booty of photographs, or in the depiction of Micheal-Ange's first cinema experience.

62. Leslie Hill, "'A Form That Thinks': Godard, Blanchot, Citation," in *For Ever Godard*, ed. James S. Williams, Michael Temple, and Michael Witt (London: Black Dog, 2004), p. 415.

63. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 70.

64. Richard Brody, *Everything is cinema: the working life of Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Co., 2008), p. 517.

65. Ibid., p. 511.

66. Ibid., p. 512.

67. See, Morgan, *Late Godard and the possibilities of cinema*, p. 170.

68. See, Jean Luc Godard, John O'Toole, and James McNeill Whistler, *Jean-Luc Godard: The Future(S) of Film: Three Interviews 2000-01* (Bern: Verlag Gachnang & Springer AG, 2002).

69. This scene, of course, contrasts with the previous sequence in *For Ever Mozart* that highlights commercial pressures under which cinema operates.

70. Brody, *Everything is Cinema*, p. 588.

71. She is played by Francoise Verny, an editor at Galliard. According to Godard, she was "one of the queens of Paris literary production, a bit like Lucie Aubrac was a queen of the Resistance" (cited in Ibid., 599).

72. Cited in Ibid., p. 603.

73. Ibid., p. 603-604.

74. Deleuze and Boundas, *The Deleuze Reader*, p. 174.

75. Brody, *Everything is cinema*, p. 596.

76. Williams, "European Culture and Artistic Resistance in Histoire(s) du Cinéma Chapter 3a, La Monnaie De L'absolu," p. 133.

77. This is in part an answer to Bazin's quest. Indeed, Bazin's influence on Godard is significant as much as Godard has asserted that "[t]he only reality in a film is the reality of in its own making." Quoted in Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, p. 280.

78. This is indeed more of a question than an answer to Kracauer's theoretical concepts. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) might provide another particularly polemical example. The endorsement of the cinema of empathetic engagement and especially the cinema of often artificial "redemption," thus has to be approached with caution. That is, we could ask Kracauer today, how can we be certain that what art attempting to "cutting off" is in fact "Medusa's head?" Even if we might not see this aspect as Godard's predominant quest, his war films pose critical questions in the on-going dialogue regarding cinema's historical potentials.

79. Thus I would suggest that even the most reflexive cinema can never be as “pure” as Godard would sometime seem to prefer it.
80. This argument builds on Miriam Hansen’s interpretations of Kracauer’s film theory. See, Doane, "The Object of Theory," p. 88.
81. Also quoted in Wheeler Winston Dixon, "For Ever Godard: Notes of Godard’s *For Ever Mozart*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1998): p. 85.
82. *Notre musique* was initially supposed to be a film about EMC records; Godard abandoned the idea, focusing instead on the dramatization of the novel *Le Silence de la mer* by Vercours written in 1943 (filmed by Jen-Pierre Melville in 1947), a story of France under German occupation. Then, however, he decided to make a film about the conflict in the Middle East. At the same time, he was invited by Francis Beub, the director of the Center André-Malraux in Bosnia to participate in Sarajevo "Recountres Européens du Livre" — visits to Sarajevo helped shape the film. Brody, *Everything is cinema*, p. 616.
83. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 88.
84. Brody, *Everything is cinema*, p. 623
85. For a contrasting view, see chapter on *Notre musique* in Brody, *Everything is cinema*.
86. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 30.
87. Brody, *Everything is cinema*, p. 618
88. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 69. [[return to p. 3](#)]
89. Ibid., pp. 97, 89.
90. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 148.
91. Susan Sontag, "Looking at War" *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2002. See, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/09/looking-at-war>>
92. Deleuze and Boudas, *The Deleuze Reader*, p. 174.
93. Trond Lundemo, "The Index and Erasure: Godard’s Approach to Film History," in *For Ever Godard*, ed. James S. Williams, Michael Temple, and Michael Witt (London: Black Dog, 2004), p. 380.
94. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London ; New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 1-10.
95. Godard was referring to *For Ever Mozart*. Quoted in Dixon, "For Ever Godard: Notes of Godard’s for Ever Mozart," p. 85.
96. See Morgan on Eisenstein in the context of Godard’s cinema. Morgan, *Late Godard and the possibilities of cinema*, p.182.
97. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 13.
98. Ibid., p. 158 [italics in the original].
99. Cited in Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 22.
100. Ibid., p. 33.

101. In contrast to geometric spaces. See, Deleuze and Boundas, *The Deleuze Reader*, p. 176.
102. Quoted in Sterritt, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible*, p. 263.
103. Cited in Matthew Longo, *The Politics of Borders: Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp. XIII-XIV.
104. Nadia Abu-Zahra, "IDs and territory: population control for resource expropriation" in Cowen, Deborah, and Emily Gilbert. eds. *War, Citizenship, Territory* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 305.
105. Ibid., p. 315.
106. Ibid., p. 320.
107. See, Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1974).
108. See, Stephen Graham, *Cities, War, and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).
109. Eyal Weizman, "Thanatotactics" in Sorkin, Michael. ed. *Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 326. See also, See also, Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007).
- 110.. Sterritt, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible*, p. 262.
111. Wim Wenders, *The Act of Seeing: Essays and Conversations* (London ; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 169.
112. Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Scandinavian University Books (Bergen, London: Universitetsforlaget; Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp. 15, 10.
113. Ibid., p. 15.
114. Longo, *The Politics of Borders*, p. XII.
115. Ibid., p. XV.
116. Ibid., p. 23-24.
117. Ibid., p. 40.
118. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 5. [[return to page 4](#)]
119. Williams states that in Godard's films, "montage—or the act of creating relations between people, objects and ideas—is, of itself, a form of history, indeed, ... montage and history are the same process." Williams, "European Culture and Artistic Resistance in Histoire(S) Du Cinéma Chapter 3a, La Monnaie De L'absolu," p. 126.
120. Morgan, *Late Godard and the possibilities of cinema*, p. 163.
121. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, pp. 77-78.

122. See, Richard and Raymond Durnat Combs, "Chapter and Verse," *Film Comment* 41, no. 1 (2005).

123. I thank the editor for this point.

124. See, Brody, *Everything is cinema*, p. 619. Andrew Sarris has observed, "In *Notre musique*, Mr. Godard talks about Jews as if they'd emerged triumphantly from the death camps to promptly drive the Palestinians out of their homeland... I am frankly surprised that most of my colleagues haven't see through Mr. Godard's evasive paradoxes, the banal anti-"Zionist"/anti-American prejudices that he shares with his countrymen, whether French or Swiss." Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 624. Brody finds in Godard's statements that "[h]is expressions of sympathy for the Jews killed in the Holocaust were interwoven with expressions of disdain for the Jews not killed in the Holocaust" (*Ibid.*, p. 559). See also Bernard-Henri Levy's comment on Godard (Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 587).

125. Peranson, "Notre Musique," p. 55.

126. Doane, "The Object of Theory," p. 87.

127. Susan Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C. Brookings Institution, 1995), p. 20.

128. Sontag, "Looking at War." See,
<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/09/looking-at-war>>

129. Susan Sontag on Charlie Rose. Wednesday 08/02/1995.
<<https://charlierose.com/videos/15694>>

130. Susan Sontag, "Godot Comes to Sarajevo," *The New York Review of Books*, October 21, 1993. See, <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1993/10/21/godot-comes-to-sarajevo/>>

131. Neven Andjelic, "Post-Yugoslav Cinema and Politucs: Films, Lies and Video Tape," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, Vol. 6, no. 2, February 2017, p. 75.

132. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 87.

133. See, Mirjana Ristic, "'Sniper Alley': The Politics of Urban Violence in the Besieged Sarajevo" *Built Environment* Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 342-356.

134. Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), p. 17.

135. See, Dzevad Karahasan, *Sarajevo: exodus of a city* (Kodansha USA Inc, 1994).

136. "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in [...] other country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists." Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 17.

137. On Balkanism and film. See, Vojislava Filipcevic, "Historical Narrative and The East-West Leitmotif in Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* and *Dust*," *Film Criticism*, Volume 29, Number 2, Winter 2004/2005, pp. 3-5. See also, Vangelis Calotychos, "Born To Be Wild?: Repetition Compulsion, Agency, And 'The Lessons Of History' in Three Balkan Films (Angelopoulos, Kusturica, Manchevski)" [conference paper] *Balkan Literatures of Dissent*, Brown University, April 20. 2007.

138. Nevena Dakovic, "The Threshold of Europe: Imagining Yugoslavia in Film," *Space of Identity*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (2001). See, <http://soi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/soi/article/view/8056/7237>.

139. Cited and discussed in Morgan, *Late Godard and the possibilities of cinema*, p. 193.

140. Pavle Levi, *Disintegration in frames: aesthetics and ideology in the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cinema* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 5.

141. See, Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

142. Ivana Kronja, "Social horror": A Critical Analysis of Ideological and Poetic Function of the Motive of Victim in the Contemporary Serbian Film," *TEMIDA* 2016.

143. See, Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, pp. 18-19.

144. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 205.

145. I thank the editor for this point.

146. In Danis Tanović's Oscar-winning *No Man's Land*, an overzealous British reporter pursues a sensationalist story of a Bosnian and a Serbian soldier stuck in a trench along with another soldier lying on a mine that will detonate if he is removed. In Michael Winterbottom's promotional *Welcome to Sarajevo*, the heroes/rescuers are in fact the Western media professionals. The main character is a journalist whose consciousness is haunted by an image of a Bosnian boy shouting, "Why are you staring at us? What are you seeking?" In Michael Haneke's intriguing *Code Unknown*, a photographer who has just returned to Paris from a post in Kosovo, where his photographs documented the ethnic cleansing of 1999, roams the subways and streets in search of anything real or tangible. He takes clandestine photos of the unguarded facial expressions of Parisian passers-by.

147. Judith interviews the French ambassador Naville ("Godard's maternal grandparents maiden name" (Brody, *Everything is Cinema*, p. 618) in Sarajevo (who sheltered her family during World War Two), who tells her, citing a German Catholic woman murdered in 1943, "the goal of the state is to be one, of the person to be two." She talks to the Palestinian poet Darwish, who tells her "we are fortunate to have Israel as an enemy.... the world is interested in you, not in us."

148. I thank the editor for this point.

149. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 75.

150. Witt, *Jean-Luc Godard, cinema historian*, pp. 2-3.

151. This is a premise behind Godard's *Historie(s) de cinema*. See, Lundemo, "The Index and Erasure: Godard's Approach to Film History."

152. Sontag, "Looking at War." See, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/09/looking-at-war> <[return to page 152](#)>

153. After the screening of the film at the New York Film Festival in October 2004, Sarah Adler told the audience that Godard's team shot the Purgatory portion of

film in three weeks, that the script set firm guidelines, that there was no improvisation. As is often the case with Godard's films, the spontaneity is carefully planned and built-in.

154. Email correspondence with Stuart Klawans. November 2017.

155. Brody, *Everything Is Cinema*, p. 619.

156. As J. Hoberman observed, "the process [of rebuilding the Mostar bridge] which involves painstakingly labeling and reassembling every stone salvaged from the river, suggests old-fashioned editing." See, J. Hoberman, "C'est La Guerre," *Artforum* 43, no. 1 (2004).

157. Witt, *Jean-Luc Godard, cinema historian*, p. 27. See also, Sam Ishii-Gonzales, "Jean-Luc Godard, Cinema Historian by Michael Witt" [book review], *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67 No. 3, Spring 2014, pp. 89-90.

158. Klawans, "Godard's Inferno."

159. On ethnic boundaries and regional political instability, see also Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, pp. 36-37.

160. Frédéric Bonnaud, "Occupational Hazards," *Film Comment* 41, no. 1 (2005).

161. Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 117.

162. Ibid., p. 115.

163. Ibid., pp. 116, 120.

164. Cited in Brody, *Everything Is Cinema*, p. 622.

165. Michael Witt writes "Her shifting roles with Godard in their post-Sonimage work testifies to the endurance of their collaboration and her absolute centrality within it: she co-wrote and co-edited *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (1979), collaborated on *Scénario du film Passion* (1983), wrote the script for *Prénom Carmen* (1982), co-edited *Je vous salue, Marie* (1983), co-wrote *Détective* (1984), co-directed and appeared in *Soft and hard* (1985), co-produced *Le Dernier mot* (1989), co-directed *Le Rapport Darty* (1989), is credited as art director on *Nouvelle vague* (1990), co-wrote and co-directed *L'Enfance de l'art* (1991), co-wrote and co-directed *Pour Thomas Wainggai* (1991), and co-wrote and co-directed *Deux fois cinquante ans de cinéma français* (1995)" Michael Witt, "On communication: the work of Anne-Marie Mieville and Jean-Luc Godard as 'Sonimage' from 1973 to 1979" [unpublished dissertation] (University of Bath, 1998), p. 9.

166. Brody, *Everything Is Cinema*, p. 619.

167. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, pp. 12-13.

168. Deleuze and Guattari, *The Deleuze Reader*, p. 178.

169. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 95.

170. Niels Niessen, "Access denied: Godard Palestine representation" *Cinema Journal*, Vol. LII, no. 2, 2013, p. 2.

171. Doane, "The Object of Theory," p. 85.

172. See also, Susan Sontag, "Godard," in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, ed. Cynthia Krupat (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982).

173. Brody, *Everything Is Cinema*, p. 625.

174. Of course, the ending also does make sense from the point of view of Godard's cinema. As critics have elucidated, the Heaven sequence includes a beautiful tracking shot, effortless yet somehow also daring, that represents an homage to François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*. Heaven, it seems, is also a universe in which believers and nonbelievers alike will be watching better movies (so many by Godard are included in this category), perhaps even in a digital format. See, Combs, "Chapter and Verse," Klawans, "Godard's Inferno."

175. Morgan, *Late Godard and the possibilities of cinema*, p. XII.

176. Longo, *The Politics of Borders*, p. 42.

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JUMP CUT

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The money shot: blood drips onto the Comedian's smiley badge in slow motion, in the film's version of the graphic novel's opening and iconic image. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



Watchmen (Warner Brothers, 2009) revises the Warner Brothers company logo to evoke the yellow-on-black cover design of the *Watchmen* graphic novel, hold the blood-spatter.

From off-brand to franchise: *Watchmen* as advertisement

by [Ezra Claverie](#)

This essay looks at Time Warner's adaptation of the 1987 graphic novel *Watchmen* into a media franchise. It argues that the Warner Brothers film *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009), adapted from the relatively self-contained book from DC Comics, functioned both as an occasion to produce new *Watchmen* texts as well as a high-profile advertisement for this new brand. Time Warner owns DC Comics and Warner Brothers, but they also own news outlets like *Entertainment Weekly*, CNN, and *Time* magazine, which helped cross-promote the film. The story of this franchise, therefore, reveals much about creativity, autonomy, ownership, and adaptation in the culture industries. In an industrial system not invested in formal experimentation or narrative closure but in the exploitation of intellectual property, discursive features that made a source text most distinctive may vanish in adaptation, while features most necessary for marketing a brand, such as iconic visual elements, may remain, as they do here. The long arc from *Watchmen*'s 1987 publication, to the 2009 film, to new *Watchmen* comics beginning in 2012 illustrates the kinds of changes that an ostensibly self-contained text undergoes as it becomes a source of new production.

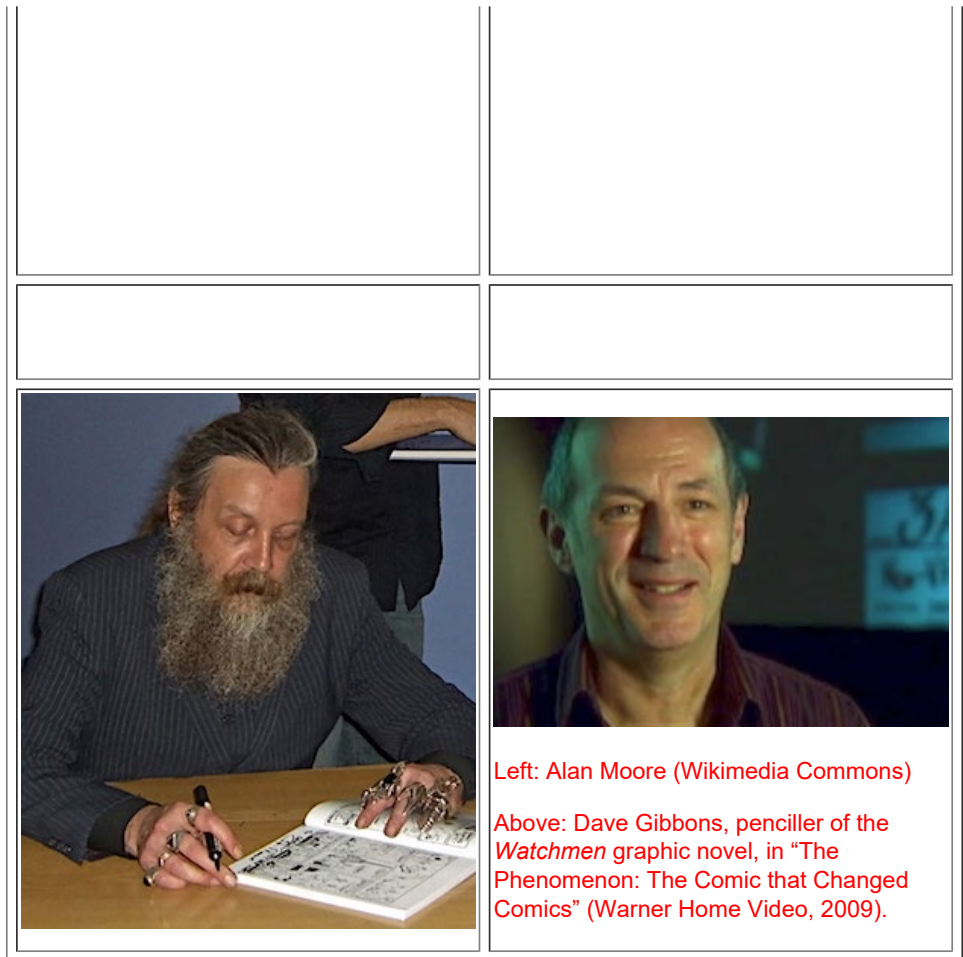
The *Watchmen* graphic novel, much studied for its formal density and self-reflexive fascination with its own medium and genre, critiques superhero comics (and the industry that produces them); in contrast, the film offers no such critique of Hollywood and its norms (aesthetic or industrial). The book, by writer Alan Moore and penciller[1] Dave Gibbons, originally appeared in twelve installments, from September 1986 to October 1987. It defied the comics industry's norms in two significant ways.



Watchmen (Warner Brothers, 2009) gives the DC Comics logo similar treatment.

| CAST | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| LAURIE JUPITER/SILK SPECTRE II | MALIN AKERMAN |
| DR. MANHATTAN/JON OSTERMAN | BILLY CRUDUP |
| ADRIAN VEIDT/OZYMANDIAS | MATTHEW GOODE |
| RORSCHACH | JACKIE EARLE HALEY |
| EDWARD BLAKE/COMEDIAN | JEFFREY DEAN MORGAN |
| DAN DREIBERG/NITE OWL | PATRICK WILSON |
| SALLY JUPITER/SILK SPECTRE | CARLA GUGINO |
| MOLOCH | MATT FREWER |
| HOLLIS MASON | STEPHEN MCHATTIE |
| JANEY SLATER | LAURA MENNELL |
| WALLY WEAVER | ROB LABELLE |
| JOHN McLAUGHLIN | GARY HOUSTON |
| PAT BUCHANAN | JAMES MICHEAL CONNOR |
| ELEANOR CLIFT | MARY ANN BURGER |
| DOUG ROTH | JOHN SHAW |

The end credits of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009) invert the color scheme of the opening company titles.



The cover of *DC Universe: Rebirth* (DC Comics, 2016), shows major DC characters reaching toward the blue-white light of Dr. Manhattan from

First, Moore wrote a story not connected to the wider DC continuity of characters like Superman and places like Gotham City, leaving the *Watchmen* characters unavailable for appearances in other DC titles. Second, by using characters created for the book, Moore gained the creative autonomy that included the freedom to kill characters. In contrast, ordinarily the comics duopoly of DC and Marvel treat characters as licensing opportunities, such that if an editor allows a writer to kill a reader favorite, both readers and licensees can count on a speedy resurrection.[2] Not so in *Watchmen*, which begins with the murder of the Comedian, a retired "masked adventurer." The book offers an alternate history of the 20th century where such adventurers shaped world events. At the end of the twelve-issue run, DC released them in trade paperback, and since then, *Watchmen* has remained one of the best selling and most studied graphic novels in English, prompting many scholarly essays as well as books like Andrew Hoberek's *Considering Watchmen: Poetics, Property, Politics*.

My essay draws on that scholarship but also on the larger archive of journalism, promotion, and spin-offs from the 2009 film, in order to situate that film in a larger corporate strategy that depended on intellectual property arrangements made in the 1980s. DC had sold the film rights to *Watchmen* shortly after its publication, yet for more than twenty years, the project languished in "development hell," moving from one studio to another, until Warner Brothers bought the rights in 2005. Although various Time Warner subsidiaries touted the extreme fidelity of the 2009 film to the graphic novel, the film simplifies and shortens the graphic novel's story. The movie uses traditional editing and mise-en-scène; no titles suggest the book's chapters, and no split-screen compositions evoke comic-book panels. By necessity, it eliminates formal elements specific to comics that made the book distinctive within its medium. In substitution, Warner Brothers created an array of spin-off home video texts that offered to "complete" the adaptation. In 2012, DC began publishing *Before Watchmen* prequel comics, and in 2016 they began to integrate *Watchmen* characters into the main DC

continuity. This essay does not examine all these moments of franchise building but instead focuses on the film, which served as a \$130 million commercial for this emergent brand.



The first page of *DC Universe: Rebirth* (DC Comics, 2016) uses the disciplined nine-panel grid that *Watchmen* used, while using images like those in the 1980s graphic novel. Photo by the author.



The epilogue of *DC Universe: Rebirth* (DC Comics, 2016) uses the nine-panel grid of *Watchmen*, while using images and quoting dialogue from the original graphic novel. Photo by the author.



At the end of *DC Universe: Rebirth* (DC Comics, 2016), a splash page reveals DC's game: folding the self-contained *Watchmen* around its more familiar, and much older, continuity of superheroes—Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and so on.



Cases of *Watchmen* DVDs. Photo by the author.

The corporate demiurge



DC Universe: Rebirth (DC Comics, 2016) converts the *Watchmen* smiley into yet another logo, and adapts its color scheme for the credits list. Photo by the author.



DC Universe: Rebirth (DC Comics, 2016) sets up the characters from *Watchmen* as a sinister force influencing history in ways its characters have only begun to understand. Here, Batman finds the Comedian's badge embedded in the wall of the Batcave. Photo by the author.

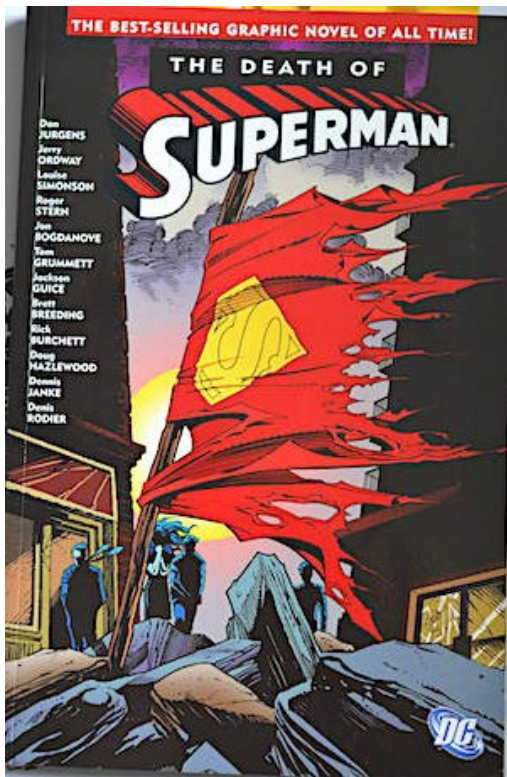
We can understand Time Warner's conversion of *Watchmen* into a franchise as a case of a media corporation taking a critical and even oppositional text and transmuting it into a new means of shareholder-owned production. In contrast to most monthly comics, which assume open-ended seriality (now punctuated by corporate reboots), Moore and Gibbons gave their book a beginning, middle, and end. Moreover, they did not use familiar DC characters but instead designed new and therefore off-brand characters as riffs on superhero archetypes, precisely because they wanted to step out of the instrumental logic that treated character and narrative as means to build revenue. *Watchmen* therefore constitutes an act of revisionism and self-critique, a deconstruction of both the genre's representational tropes and the commercial practices of the comics industry. Simultaneously, the book's density and foregrounding of its own form make it, as Andrew Hoberek has argued, legible as a work having the values of high art, performing metacriticism in both its narrative and its visual design.[3]

Yet despite DC's constant praise of the formal daring of *Watchmen*, three decades later the company did something that surprised even readers jaded by the company's many series reboots. In the May 2016 premier issue of *DC Universe: Rebirth*, the publisher began to integrate superhero characters from *Watchmen* into the mainstream DC continuity. In the year of *Watchmen*'s thirtieth anniversary, Batman pried from the wall of the Batcave the Comedian's iconic, blood-spattered smiley badge, suggesting a new kind of franchise reboot, one that put superhero high art to work in the service of the DC corporate brand.

When *DC Universe: Rebirth* hit comic book stores, the Warner Brothers film *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016) still played in theaters. Based on characters owned by DC (another Time Warner subsidiary), *Batman v Superman* recombined elements from seven decades of comics while also borrowing key material from best-selling DC story arcs from the past three decades, for example, remixing the 1992 "Death of Superman" story arc with the 1986 *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Such bricolage, typical of Hollywood films based on characters owned by DC or Marvel, offers long-time fans the pleasures of surprise while also enabling conglomerates to cross-promote commodities produced or licensed by other divisions. However, *Batman v Superman* also shares discursive features with Zack Snyder's 2009 adaptation of *Watchmen*, an R-rated oddity in this PG-13 genre.

Instead of bricolage, the *Watchmen* film and its surrounding promotion adopted an ethic of extreme fidelity, adapting the comic in the manner that prestige films adapt novels. Starting in 2005, Time Warner began converting the studiously off-brand *Watchmen* graphic novel into a new range brand, analogous to Batman or Superman: a constellation of recognizable characters and visual icons that editors, filmmakers, or licensees could use as occasions to produce new texts. Moore and Gibbons's closed text became the means for DC to build an expanding franchise that would include a theatrical film, direct-to-video spin-offs, computer games, new editions of the book, eight different *Before Watchmen* comic series, and, as of 2016, the main DC continuity itself.[4] For *DC Universe: Rebirth* imagines the universe that Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman inhabit as the creation of Dr. Manhattan, a godlike character from *Watchmen*.

Although scholars have written much about *Watchmen* the book, they have written little about *Watchmen* the movie, and still less about its role as the linchpin of a transmedia range brand that Time Warner promoted using DC Comics, Warner Brothers, and even news outlets. This outlier actually helps us understand the typical duopoly superhero film, for the same imperative drives both: not the imperative to tell a particular story or to explore the formal possibilities of a medium but to advertise a brand. Adaptation scholar Clare



Time Warner has killed and resurrected Superman before, starting with the 1992 *Death of Superman* arc (DC Comics). Photo by the author.

Parody has argued that franchises that adapt texts across media present a constellation of interpretative issues connected to corporate marketing aims:

“Franchise adaptations ... need to be understood not only as inflected by the aims and protocols of entertainment branding but also, moreover, as complicit in them. Indeed, adaptation in a franchise context can be read as an act of brand management, key dimensions of the intertextual dynamics it sets up explicated and produced by brand logic.”[5]

Time Warner worked to hide the advertising function of its *Watchmen* movie behind rhetorics of fidelity and integrity, yet a study of the book’s history, the film’s development, and Time Warner’s promotion reveals other motives, methods, and ethics. When Batman finds the Comedian’s badge in *DC Universe: Rebirth*, we see those motives, methods, and ethics come to fruition, as the conglomerate assimilates an oppositional work and repurposes it as a means to its own ends.

Those who study the workings Hollywood studios and the conglomerates that own them often find themselves at cross purposes with the discursive strategies of those companies, which seek to obscure managerial goals from audiences, competitors, and workers. Non-disclosure agreements and social promises of secrecy conceal much that would interest scholars, as does promotional rhetoric about artistry or curatorial responsibility. Thus, ethnographer Sherry Ortner notes that in Hollywood, “information is managed for competitive advantage.”[6] And political economist Janet Wasko asks,

“where can one find accurate production figures beyond the public relations rumor mill reported in *Variety* or other trade publications? Where is it possible to find accurate or meaningful figures on stock ownership?”[7]

My analysis of the history of the *Watchmen* franchise centers on a theatrical film but takes a methodological hint from the protagonists of the graphic novel, attending to paratexts often neglected in film studies. The main characters of the graphic novel either once fought or still fight crime as masked adventurers; the story begins as a murder mystery, with several “masks” trying to solve the murder of one of their former comrades, the Comedian. The book’s ostensible villain, Adrian Veidt, has himself retired from adventuring to become the CEO of a powerful conglomerate. He now uses the likenesses of his former vigilante associates to manufacture toys and a Saturday morning cartoon show without their permission and without compensating them. Significantly, Veidt uses the disparate global holdings of Veidt Enterprises not only to engineer an apocalyptic hoax but also to obscure the unity of his plan.[8]

The book’s masked-detective narrative and its non-linear form foreground the difficulty of interpreting fragmentary clues; chapters include epilogues that present intradiegetic prose texts containing information found nowhere else,



Industrialist Adrian Veidt uses his own likeness (center) for a toy based on his former costumed persona, Ozymandias. He uses the likenesses of Nite Owl and Rorschach (right) without their permission and without compensating them. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



In a moment written for the film, the retired Nite Owl admires the toys that Veidt’s company has based on the masked adventurers of days past in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009). He seems

amused, and does not challenge Veidt on the matter.



A journalist interviews Adrian Veidt, questioning Veidt's unauthorized use of his former colleagues' likenesses for a line of superhero toys, a cartoon, and other merchandise. When the image doesn't cut away to unmotivated views of the photographer, the mise en scène distracts with rain falling against the window, airships in the sky, and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



Snyder inserts into the scene an actor playing the famous photographer Annie Liebowitz, neither present in the graphic novel nor named in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009). Despite giving her no lines, the film cuts to close ups of her.



As in the *McLaughlin Group* scene, Snyder cuts and tracks within the space to enliven an exposition dump. Here we see Veidt through the viewfinder of Liebowitz's camera. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).

which render intelligible events in the comic-panel sections. Taking a hint from Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately*, I seek to assemble an account of this franchise from sources often discounted: promotional and making-of paratexts. [9] I treat Time Warner's many utterances about the movie as traces of the larger object of study, the conglomerate's building of a *Watchmen* franchise.

Authorship versus ownership

For three decades, *Watchmen* has served as a cautionary tale about DC's exploitative treatment of its most famous artists. In the 1980s, when Moore and Gibbons negotiated with DC to make *Watchmen* on their own aesthetic and narrative terms, they did so in the midst of shifts in the way that the comics industry credited and paid creators. Independent publishers, seeking to compete with the DC-Marvel duopoly, offered creators possessory credit on book covers and in "marquee" titles like *Eastman and Laird's Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and they offered shares in or total ownership of characters. To compete, the duopoly followed suit: DC offered Moore and Gibbons possessory credit and ownership of *Watchmen* once it went out of print. However, DC kept the book in print, voiding the offer and leading to Moore's rift with DC.

In Time Warner's discourse about *Watchmen*, Moore's authorship functions both as a sign of the book's prestige and as a reminder of the expropriation long the norm in the comics industry. The native of Northampton, England, began working for DC as a writer for *Swamp Thing*, a second-tier horror comic. Moore's stories combined achronological, multi-track narratives with a readiness to subvert genre norms, and his work won awards in the United Kingdom and United States. *BBC 4* notes that *Swamp Thing*'s circulation grew "from 17,000 to 100,000" during his run.[10] In his work for DC, Moore wrote for titles headlined by proprietary characters created by others, which DC sought to preserve as sources of revenue. This necessarily limited Moore's narrative horizons. As Andrew Hoberek notes, Moore "conceived *Watchmen* as a story using the 'properties' DC had acquired from Charlton,"[11] a defunct comics company whose catalogue DC had purchased. Moore built his reputation by re-working the creations of others, so Hoberek rightly challenges both DC's styling of Moore as a Romantic genius and Moore's own habit of styling himself as a creator of hermetic texts that must not be altered by others.[12]

Moore's work contributed to the emergence of new discourses of authorship in the U.S. comics industry. So-called marquee titles appeared especially on books aimed at adult readers, which publishers released without the seal of the Comics Code Authority, a self-censorship body modeled on the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. In his history of the comics industry, Paul Lopes argues, "it was only when Marvel and DC's economic interests were challenged by independent publishers that they significantly changed their treatment of artists." [13] Moore's many interviews in *Comics Journal* and *Comics Interview* during the mid 1980s meant that his name had become a selling point, and DC used it to promote *Watchmen*. A 1985 *DC Spotlight* boosting upcoming publications quoted Moore:

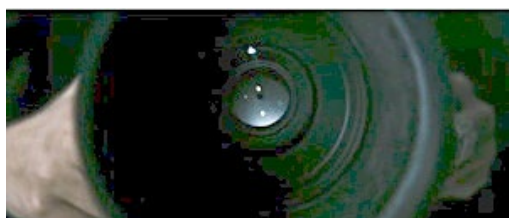
"'Dave Gibbons and I came up with a way to approach superheroes that hasn't been done before,' Alan Moore says of the forthcoming *Watchmen* [...]. Moore is intending to create a project that will stand apart from any other hero comic published today.'" [14]

The ad frames Moore's contribution in the Romantic terms: intention, creation, and uniqueness. Two decades later, Warner Brothers would take a different approach promoting the *Watchmen* movie, talking around Moore's name even as they continued to praise the work he did for DC (and only the work that he did for DC).

When Moore asked permission to kill Charlton characters in his *Watchmen* series,



Even in a shot seemingly meant to direct our attention toward Liebowitz, Snyder busies the scene with chiaroscuro and flashes of metal on the women who surround her. The shot tracks in on Liebowitz, suggesting her importance, but none of these women says a word. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



A close-up shows us the shutter of Liebowitz's camera in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



Snyder adds the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center to the view from Veidt's penthouse office. If their nostalgic looming behind Veidt and his interviewer did not already constitute a demand on our attention, the airship in the middle of the frame, drifting rightward as the men talk, suggests a collision course with the towers. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).

DC refused. Hoberek remarks,

"It is small wonder that DC turned down Moore's request to use the Charlton characters, since he was essentially asking the company to eschew these characters' potential as renewable sources of profit." [15]

Moore responded to DC's refusal by creating original-enough heroes that he could kill or retire at the end of the story, letting DC keep the Charlton characters. Moore saw the limited series as a platform for a different kind of story:

"with the advent of the mini-series [...] it has become *possible* to create a number of characters that are designed only to exist for the duration of that series. [his emphasis] It's a bit like the sort of freedom that all book authors enjoy, you know. There was no call for Charles Dickens to write *David Copperfield II: Steerforth Strikes Back*." [16]

Moore stresses wholeness, coherence, and creative control, a control that he seeks to extend to the after-lives of characters. He invokes Dickens to claim an autonomy enjoyed by few writers of monthly comics, citing the novel as a sign of certain aesthetic qualities that open-ended serial comics lack.

"[W]e've tried to sort of bring the sensibilities of a novel to the maxi-series, because the maxi-series would seem to me to be the perfect vehicle for the creation of comic book novels. [...] We knew what was in each of the twelve chapters. We *knew* the various design elements, so that we could work upon it as a coherent whole, and just produce it as that. [his emphasis] There isn't going to be a sequel to *Watchmen*." [17]

Moore and Gibbons also deliberately foreground and subvert conventions of the superhero genre. Unlike the putatively simplistic form of superhero comics, *Watchmen*'s form resists linear reading. Moore uses a wide range of the formal possibilities of comics, juxtaposing within the panel multiple registers: diegetic images, speech balloons, intradiegetic texts and images, and text insets. Often, one or more of these registers comments ironically another, though often the reader does not grasp that irony until a later page. Moore and Gibbons also use and foreground the properties of the comic book as a platform: patterns connect panels across the single page, the two-page spread, and whole chapters. Such relations depend on the reader's ability to stop and turn back to correlate resemblances and recurrences.

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Art Spiegelman at a 2012 book signing
(Wikimedia Commons).

“They wouldn’t pay me a fraction of what I was worth.”

Watchmen achieves a high degree of formal complexity and density not only compared to mainstream superhero comics but also compared to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. These graphic novels also appeared in 1986, sometimes adduced as the year when U.S. culture grasped the potential of comics as a medium. However, Spiegelman’s and Miller’s books lack the kinds of symmetries and formal repetitions that obtain through *Watchmen*, and they lack its extreme self-reflexivity about both its form and its genre. Writer-artist Spiegelman approaches “serious” subject matter in *Maus*, the problem of representing the trauma of the Holocaust both individually and as world history, but *Maus* does not use a particularly challenging form, especially compared to Spiegelman’s more avant-garde work collected in *Breakdowns* (1977) or his deconstruction of U.S. responses to 9-11 in *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), an oversized book that doubles as an homage to early newspaper strips. The popularity of *Maus* arguably depends on its combination of formal accessibility, the serious concerns of high art, and the visual conventions of funny-animal comics, among the lowest of low arts. Spiegelman’s avant-garde work in the comix underground remains unknown to the mass readership of *Maus*.

In their promotion of *Watchmen*, DC stressed not the work’s closure or formal complexity but the creators’ individuality. An ad in DC’s *Infinity, Inc.* called *Watchmen* “A 12 issue deluxe series by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons.”[18] DC’s ad for the trade paperback in the literary section of the *New York Times* invoked the artists but obscured the book’s relationship to monthly comics:

“From Alan Moore, critically acclaimed and bestselling comic book writer of *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, comes an extraordinary graphic novel. Illustrated by Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* is a visual and lyrical *tour de force*. ‘Transcends mere comics—it’s a brilliant piece of fiction. What Moore could you ask for?’ –*Village Voice*.”[19]

Yet despite this promotional rhetoric of individualism, DC’s treatment Moore and Gibbons conformed to the comics industry’s practice of treating artists’ creations as corporate property.



A moment of self-reflexivity in *Maus*: Artie, Spiegelman's stand-in, learns that his father has read one of his earlier comics (dealing with Artie's mother's suicide). The book narrates both Artie's father's survival of the Holocaust and also Artie's interviews of his father for *Maus*, yet it does not foreground the history, meanings, or mode of production of funny-animal stories as *Watchmen* does with superhero stories. Photo by the author.



Frank Miller at the 1982 San Diego Comic-Con

Because U.S. comics artists lack the collective bargaining power of unions, the industry has long treated artists as freelancers under work for hire contracts. Matt Stahl writes, “companies’ freedom to market products and appropriate profits depends on their ability to exclude numerous creative workers from the magic circle of authorship. Work for hire makes this separation and property alienation possible.”[20] Against this background, DC proposed a contract that sounded progressive: DC would hold the copyright only while *Watchmen* remained in print, and then ownership would revert to Moore and Gibbons.[21] In 2005 Gibbons explained:

“In 1987, once a comic book series had run its course, that was pretty much the end of it. There might be sporadic foreign editions or reprints in the back of other titles, but even series conceived as self-contained stories [...] were thereafter unavailable except in the back-issue bins. The notion of collecting just-published material and re-marketing it in book form was virtually unknown.”[22]

By keeping *Watchmen* in print, DC denied Moore and Gibbons the promised reversion of ownership. Gibbons speaks diplomatically about his dealings with DC, but Moore later called DC’s actions a “swindle.”[23] DC converted Moore’s off-brand characters—written to satisfy both Moore’s desire for creative autonomy and the company’s desire to keep the Charlton characters—into intellectual property that would become a new range brand, but only after someone made a *Watchmen* movie.

Jenette Kahn, president of DC comics from 1981 to 2002, oversaw DC’s recruitment of Alan Moore and Frank Miller, both of whom would do their most

(Wikimedia Commons).



In her video for *Makers.com*, Jenette Kahn claims to have advocated the interests of comic-book writers and artists at DC.

famous work for the company before fleeing. A January 1985 *New York Times* profile detailed how Kahn had “turned DC into what she calls a ‘creative rights company,’ whose products are providing licensing and movie revenues for other Warner divisions,” although “Warner will not say how much of [its] profits are accountable to DC.”[24] To sell licenses, characters had to appear in good stories, so Kahn had to attract good artists; DC therefore offered “more creative control and better financial terms.”[25] In 2001 the women’s comics collective *Sequential Tart* interviewed Kahn, asking about her “proudest moments” and what she wished she “had done differently.” She answers,

“I am the daughter of a rabbi, so perhaps that accounts for my being especially proud of the pioneering work we did on creators’ rights. When I came to DC, the industry had very few obligations to the talent. [...] It wasn’t an easy fight. Because we were part of a larger corporation, I had to sell the concept to our superiors. There was no union of freelancers demanding rights. The thought of voluntarily giving up money (royalties, participations in licensing and media) was a difficult premise to swallow. I addressed the issue from two perspectives: one, that it was morally the right thing to do (I doubt this weighed heavily) and, two, that we’d get a better quality of ideas if our freelancers had a stake in anything new they created. It was the latter argument, I think, that ultimately carried the day. But although I always felt the moral argument was critical, the business one was heartfelt and has proved correct over the years. We do get a higher caliber of invention. And I also sleep better at night.”[26]

In the same interview, Kahn recounts recruiting Frank Miller to DC but does not name Alan Moore, and she does not mention that both left DC because of the company’s treatment of them under her supposedly progressive tenure.

Kahn often speaks of her earlier departure from Scholastic, where she had founded the magazine *Dynamite*. “My ideas had made millions for the company,” she says in the 1985 profile, “but they wouldn’t pay me a fraction of what I was worth.”[27] William Sarnoff, chair of publishing at Warner Communications Incorporated, had offered Kahn “total editorial control” over DC: “I always knew that I wanted creative autonomy,” she said. “I had confidence in my ability to have good ideas and implement them.”[28] In a video interview for *Makers.com*, the AOL-Huffington Post’s “collection of women’s stories,” Kahn offers another telling:

“*Dynamite* became the most successful magazine in all of Scholastic’s history. So I said, ‘Well, now that it’s such a success, of course I want to get a royalty.’ And they’re like, ‘Oh, no, no no—you would make more than the chairman of the board!’ And I’m like, ‘That is so not the point.’ And so I created a third magazine, and I called it *Smash* because I wanted to smash *Dynamite*.”[29]

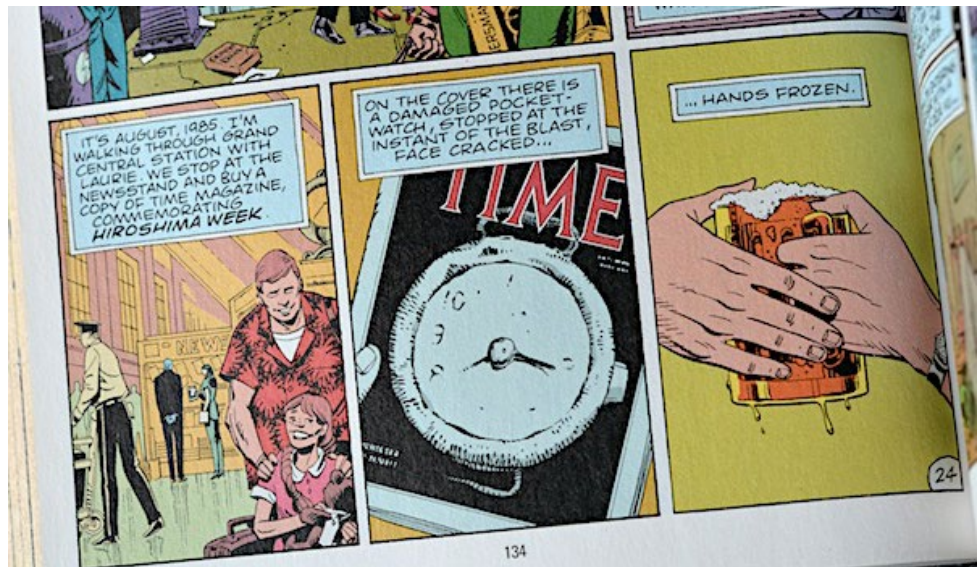
Kahn, like Moore and like most other workers, aspired to more autonomy and better pay, and she bristled at her employers’ expropriation of the value she created for them. In light of DC’s treatment of Moore, Gibbons, and other work for hire artists, we can see that while Kahn objected to Scholastic’s exploitation of her, she did not object to exploitation in principle. *Makers.com* notes that Kahn “helped the company grow from 35 people (with three women, including herself) to 250 people with women representing one-half of the staff.”[30] In this light, her career at DC becomes legible as corporate feminism, a breaking of glass ceilings that leaves regimes of exploitation not weaker but stronger, better able to use demographic diversity and inclusion to legitimate inequality. Kahn embodies the contradiction between U.S. rhetorics of fairness, individualism, and hard work on one hand, and on the other, the logics of expropriation and exploitation that organize production in the culture industries.[31]



Frank Miller's 1986 *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* took intradiegetic mass-media representations of the Batman as one of its central preoccupations, but without *Watchmen*'s self-reflexive obsession with its own form and genre. Here, on page ninety of the continuously paginated graphic novel edition, *Time* magazine appears, three years before Warner Communications, Inc. would acquire Time, Inc. Photo by the author.

The “unfilmable graphic novel”





After the original monthly run of *Watchmen* finished, DC sold the film rights to 20th Century Fox through producer Lawrence Gordon, but production repeatedly stalled.[32] Over the next two decades, Gordon would try to develop the film at Universal, then at Paramount. When the latter attempt failed in June of 2005, Gordon began negotiating with Warner Brothers, and in December the studio announced the sale.[33] Since Time Warner owned both DC and Warner Brothers, the conglomerate had incentives that other studios lacked. As Lopes notes, in the 2000s, “The trade book market for North American graphic novels also was growing at unprecedented levels,” and “By 2005, *Publishers Weekly* was touting the unquestionable boom in graphic novels.”[34] Considering the summer box-office of *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) and the still-thriving DVD market, Gordon had brought the film rights “home” to Time Warner at what must have seemed the perfect time.



Time magazine appears in “Watchmaker,” the fourth chapter of *Watchmen*, but not as cross-promotion among properties in a single conglomerate. WCI would not purchase Time, Inc. until 1989. Instead, the magazine's title reinforces the chapter's meditation on time. The chapter's narrator, former nuclear scientist Jon Osterman, AKA Dr. Manhattan, has simultaneous consciousness of his own past and future; critics have read this as a metaphor for the comics' reader's godlike power to move forward and backward through the moments captured in the individual panels of a comic book. Photo by the author.

Moore has never expressed enthusiasm for film adaptations of comics. Instead, he has repeatedly argued that comics should explore the formal possibilities of comics rather than creating narratives for export to other media. Despite similarities between the cinematic frame and the comics panel, Moore considers such comparisons limiting: if cinematic techniques “are seen as the highest point to which comic art can aspire then the medium is condemned forever to be a poor

relative of the motion picture industry.”[35] Instead, he argues that comics writers should explore techniques “that we can do with our storytelling that cannot be successfully duplicated by other media.”[36] As we will see later, journalists who wrote about *Watchmen*’s decades in development hell would reduce Moore’s claims about medium specificity and goals for the book to one word, *unfilmable*, then use that word to explain the movie’s troubled development.

| | |
|---|--|
|  |  |
| <p>The Hughes Brothers’ 2001 adaptation of <i>From Hell</i> turns the book’s non-linear alternative history of Jack the Ripper murders into a straightforward supernatural romance. The film re-imagines the book’s stout, stolid, and happily married Inspector Abberline as the lithe, tattooed, opium eating, psychic, and single detective played by Johnny Depp (Twentieth Century Fox, 2001).</p> | <p>Inspector Abberline prepares to arrest Sir William Gull, physician of Queen Victoria, in <i>From Hell</i> (Twentieth Century Fox, 2001).</p> |
|  |  |
| <p>In the film adaptation of <i>League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</i> (Twentieth Century Fox, 2003), a vampire Mina Harker prepares to execute Dorian Gray at the climax of their <i>wuxia</i>-style battle. Alan Moore began his <i>League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</i> comics for Wildstorm before DC acquired the company. Moore then left Wildstorm to finish <i>League</i> with other publishers. <i>League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</i> combined public-domain characters from Victorian fiction into a “superhero” team after the fashion of DC’s Justice League or Marvel Comics’ Avengers. ...</p> | <p>... However, when Twentieth Century Fox produced their film adaptation of <i>League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</i> (2003), they could not secure the film rights to the name “The Invisible Man” held by Universal. Moore’s graphic novel, following H. G. Wells, had called the character Griffin, but Fox, fearful of treading on Universal’s claim to the cinematic <i>Invisible Man</i> (Universal Studios, 1933), renamed their character Skinner, and in early promotion called him “An Invisible Man” rather than “The Invisible Man.” Here, Griffin/An Invisible man fixes him self a drink in Dorian Gray’s library.</p> |



In *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2003), An Invisible Man debriefs with Allan Quatermain after his reconnoiter of the villain’s lair. He tells Quatermain of the villain’s plan to duplicate the powers of the League, from Captain Nemo’s submarine to Doctor Jekyll’s formula for turning

In the years following *Watchmen*’s publication, Moore’s relationship with the comics industry deteriorated. Frank Miller had left DC in 1988.[37] Moore left in 1989, in part over DC’s handling of the *Watchmen* contract; he subsequently worked for independent publisher Wildstorm Studios, but in 1998, DC bought Wildstorm.[38] In the 2000s, Hollywood released adaptations of Moore’s work, *From Hell* (Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, 2001) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Stephen Norrington, 2003), made, according to industry practice, without Moore’s input or permission. However, in March 2005, Joel Silver falsely claimed that Moore had endorsed the script of *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005), an adaptation of another of Moore’s stories that DC owned. When Warner Brothers refused to correct Silver’s claim, Moore quit Wildstorm, demanding “his name be removed from the *V for Vendetta* film” and “from any of his work that DC might reprint.”[39] Moore subsequently forbade his name to appear on film adaptations.[40] Although Moore and Gibbons do not own *Watchmen*, they do own their names, and therefore Moore’s demand that

into a rampaging beast, “to sell to the most eager nations.” Proprietary characters, both within the film’s narrative and in the industry producing it, represent a form of fixed capital, a means of new cultural production.



When Allan Quatermain asks the seemingly mercenary An Invisible Man why he would stay to help the League thwart the villain, An Invisible Man replies, “Any more like me, and I lose the franchise” (Twentieth Century Fox, 2003). Even superhero blockbusters built primarily on public-domain sources betray the rivalries and anxieties of the intellectual-property managers that trade in film rights to texts.



Producer Joel Silver made false public comments about Moore’s approval of the script for *V for Vendetta* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2005). When the studio refused to issue a retraction, Moore forbade his own name to appear in any future film adaptations of his work. Despite this film’s liberalizing of the book’s radical politics, the film nevertheless made the traditional Guy Fawkes mask an international symbol of anti-authoritarian direct action. Here, V kills a police officer during his raid on a television station.



V for Vendetta (Twentieth Century Fox, 2005) turns Moore’s principled anarchist hero into one

Warner Brothers not use his name on new texts had legal force. Warner Brothers would then resort to other means to construct the authenticity and merit of their *Watchmen* adaptation.

The film’s long gestation

The *Watchmen* movie spent an unusually long time in development, with a long series of failures at different studios. My analysis here argues that the movie finally happened because Warner Brothers, unlike other major studios, belonged to the same conglomerate that owned the rights to the graphic novel, giving the parent conglomerate reason to take a chance adapting a difficult text in a high-budget genre. Even if the movie failed, it would sell books. Moreover, Time Warner owned both light and serious news outlets that would help promote the film but without drawing attention to the conglomerate’s overarching interest in the franchise.

Time Warner began publicity for the *Watchmen* movie in the 21 October 2005 issue of subsidiary *Entertainment Weekly*. Jeff Jensen proclaimed, “*Watchmen* is poised to reenter the pop consciousness”: “talks are under way to produce a long-in-development movie adaptation at Warner Bros.”[41] Around this announcement Jensen builds an article that doubles as a primer on the graphic novel and its characters. Jensen compares *Watchmen* to *Citizen Kane*, “a masterwork representing the apex of artistry” in its medium.[42] He praises Moore but omits Moore’s troubles with DC, noting vaguely that Moore opposes the adaptation “for artistic, business, and personal reasons.”[43] As Gray notes, “one of the great economic benefits of conglomeration has been the ability to advertise on commonly owned channels.”[44] When one of those channels appears to report the news, however light, even better for the conglomerate. Significantly, Jensen’s article appeared three days after *Publishers Weekly* (not a Time Warner property) announced DC’s plans for an “Absolute” edition of *Watchmen*, a slipcased hardcover retailing for \$75.[45] The timing suggests that the talks between Gordon and Warner Brothers prompted the launch of *Absolute Watchmen*, too.

Time Warner subsidiaries took up the word that had emerged in British accounts of the movie’s development: *unfilmable*. In 2001 the *Independent*’s David Thompson had called *Watchmen* a book “described by Moore as ‘unfilmable.’”[46] In April 2005 the *Guardian*’s Steve Rose called *Watchmen* “judged to be unfilmable by the author himself.”[47] On 17 July 2008 *Entertainment Weekly* ran an interview with Zack Snyder, conducted by Jeff Jensen, which marks the conglomerate’s adoption of the tag: Jensen calls the book a “cult-pop artifact that many had deemed unfilmable, but Snyder may have proven them wrong.” Note the timing of this interview: the following day, 18 July, the *Watchmen* trailer would debut before *The Dark Knight* on 9,200 screens in North America, a new record.[48]

In 2008 and 2009 most commentators noted the film’s troubled development, and nearly all called it “unfilmable.” MTV attributes the term to fans, who supposedly wish “someone would come along and turn [*Watchmen*’s] seemingly unfilmable brilliance into a movie.”[49] Others use the passive voice to turn *unfilmable* into doxa: *Watchmen* “has been called ‘unfilmable,’”[50] and it “has been billed as ‘unfilmable’ for more than 20 years.”[51] Warner Brothers use the tag in their press kit, where passive voice conceals Time Warner’s agency as propagator of the meme: “*Watchmen* has long been considered [...] unfilmable.”[52] The studio uses vague phrasing to do the same: “People always said *Watchmen* was the unfilmable graphic novel,” says Zack Snyder.”[53] The press kit also stresses Snyder’s fidelity to the graphic novel: “Zack respected the source material so much that he knew the only way to adapt it was to hew as close to the source as possible.”[54] By early 2009, this narrative dominated: “Dubbed unfilmable until director Zack Snyder came along.”[55] “Alan Moore believes his

fighting for vaguely defined freedom. It also turns the book's ethnically-cleansed, white-nationalist Britain into a cosmopolitan if still authoritarian state (thereby providing a model for Marvel Studios' strenuously multi-racial revision of the kingdom Asgard in the *Thor* films). In this sequence, V's admirers remove their masks to a show a multi-ethnic fascist Britain, where whites did not deport or murder racial Others.



"The Phenomenon: The Comic that Changed Comics" (Warner Home Video, 2009) presents a montage of accolades for the *Watchmen* graphic novel, but lays special emphasis on the accolade bestowed by Time Warner subsidiary *Time* magazine



"The Phenomenon: The Comic that Changed Comics" presents *Watchmen* movie director Zack Snyder in a black t-shirt against a yellow background, repeating the franchise's color scheme.



Deborah Snyder, producer of the film and wife of director Zack Snyder, says, "It was the only graphic novel to be on *Time* magazine's top one hundred English-language novels of the

Watchmen is unfilmable—and Zack Snyder agrees." [56] The hype became self-propagating.

Shortly before the film's 6 March 2009 premiere, other Time Warner subsidiaries repeated the pressbook's claims. On 25 February 2009, Jeff Jensen, now writing for CNN, announced that despite "*Watchmen*'s rep as the Unfilmable Graphic Novel," Snyder "faithfully" adapts the book. [57] By capitalizing *Unfilmable Graphic Novel*, Jensen reifies the tag that he introduced into Time Warner's promotional discourse in July 2008. Nick Hunt and J. D. Cargill's stories for CNN, to their credit, point out something that most colleagues omit: ties between these companies. Cargill notes that Time Warner owns CNN and Warner Brothers, and Hunt notes that Time Warner owns CNN and DC. [58] However, neither Hunt nor Cargill connects all three subsidiaries with their parent. They gesture toward disclosure without parsing the conglomerate's ownership for readers.

Cargill and Hunt do both cite *Watchmen*'s presence on *Time* magazine's list of the hundred greatest novels published since the magazine's 1923 inception. Compiled by editor Richard Lacayo and regular contributor Lev Grossman and published over multiple issues, the list consists of *Watchmen* and ninety-nine prose novels: no short-story cycles, poems, or plays, and no other comics. In the 24 October 2005 installment, *Watchmen* gets pride of place the top of the page. I quote here Grossman's description of *Watchmen* in its entirety:

"The story of a ragbag of bizarre, damaged, retired superheroes reunited by the murder of a former teammate, *Watchmen* is told in fugal, overlapping plotlines and gorgeous panels rich with cinematic leitmotifs. A work of ruthless psychological realism, it's a landmark in the graphic novel medium. It would be a masterpiece in any." [59]

Note the timing: the week that *Time* puts *Watchmen* on their hundred-novels list, DC Comics announces their slipcased deluxe reprint *Absolute Watchmen*. That same week, Jensen announces the *Watchmen* movie negotiations at Warner Brothers. Grossman's claim about the book's "cinematic" qualities repeats a commonplace attempt at praise by writers less familiar with comics and therefore dependent on comparisons to other media. However, his claim that *Watchmen* "would be a masterpiece in any" medium seems a non sequitur unless we recall the timing of this list: during Warner Brothers' negotiations for the film rights. The timing and Grossman's remarks about *Watchmen* suggest that *Time* made this exception for one comic book as part of a strategy to promote not just the book but also adaptations into other media.

Grossman's past conduct makes his listing of *Watchmen* even more suspect: in the 1990s, he created fake online identities—"sockpuppets"—to post favorable reviews of his own novel on Amazon.com. In 1999, he admitted using sockpuppets without expressing remorse for "the lies" or "the deception." [60] At the time of writing, Grossman has not answered my query about his rationale for including *Watchmen* on the list. Yet despite the dubious credibility of the book's inclusion on *Time*'s list, most reporting about the *Watchmen* movie cites the list as evidence of the book's greatness and the movie's ambition. Scholars cite the list, too. On the first page of his monograph on *Watchmen*, Hoberek, to his credit, raises the suspicion "that Grossman was simply cross-promoting another product in his company's portfolio," but he offers instead to pursue "what we might learn by taking *Watchmen*'s inclusion seriously and treating it as a work of literature." [61] Of six scholarly essays that mention the list, all cite it uncritically as evidence of the book's stature. [62] None question the oddity of a single comic book on a list of prose novels, or *Time*'s conflict of interest, or Grossman's credibility. Why should we find surprising these uncritical citations of *Time*'s list? Two reasons warrant discussion here.

First, the graphic novel *Watchmen* itself critiques the reach of conglomerates

Twentieth Century.” From “The Phenomenon: The Comic that Changed Comics.”



In the next shot after Deborah Snyder mentions the hundred-novels list, Lev Grossman appears and says, “By any imaginable aesthetic standard, *Watchmen* is a masterpiece.” However, the video neither identifies Grossman as the person who wrote *Watchmen* into the list nor signals his affiliation with *Time* magazine. From “The Phenomenon: The Comic that Changed Comics.”



The credits sequence of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009) puts industrialist and mass-murderer Adrian Veidt at Studio 54, not referenced in the graphic novel. Snyder adds to the tableau behind him Mick Jagger, David Bowie, and the Village People.

through its depiction of the villain Adrian Veidt, the CEO who uses his company’s holdings to create a bogus alien. Veidt hires scientists to construct the telepathic monster, then hires writers, artists, and avant-garde musicians to create a plausibly alien cultural archive for the decoy. When it dies, it telepathically broadcasts this “terrible information.”[63] When these workers finish, Veidt uses assassins to kill them, concealing their labor. If we think of this monster as a media text, then Veidt becomes legible as a duplicitous producer, exploiting workers and erasing their names for his own ends. The monster frightens the USA and USSR into cooperation not merely through the “terrible information” it carries but also through the implicit threat that it may be the first in an unwanted franchise of aliens teleporting into Manhattan; the first monster’s arrival kills millions, so nobody wants a sequel. Hoberek reads Veidt Enterprises’ unauthorized use of the likenesses of Rorschach and Nite Owl for toys as an allegory of “the conflict between the work for hire creative talent of the comics industry and the corporations which by and large controlled and profited from their creations.”[64]

However, I read Veidt’s exploitation of his former colleagues’ likenesses as but a smaller instance of his larger *modus operandi* of expropriating the cultural work of others for his own purposes: the bogus alien instantiates more fully this pattern of instrumentalizing and erasing creative workers. Per Alan Moore’s demand, the *Watchmen* film does not identify him by name; the credits bill the film as “based on the graphic novel co-created and illustrated by Dave Gibbons and published by DC Comics,” writing Moore out and DC in. However, this credit appears beside a smiling Adrian Veidt, his arms crossed and eyes half-closed in self-satisfaction. This tableau therefore reads not as an artist’s critical allegory of intellectual property relations, as Hoberek argues we should read Veidt’s narrative in the book, but instead as Time Warner’s triumphal allegory of its own success in retaining control of Moore’s work.

Second, many commentators had remarked on the *Watchmen* movie’s role in selling merchandise before the movie even opened. On 13 August 2008, the *New York Times* reported that the *Watchmen* trailer had boosted sales of the trade paperback: “‘from our conversations with the book industry people, there has never been a trailer that did this,’ said Paul Levitz, the president and publisher of DC Comics, which has printed 900,000 additional paperback copies [...] Last year it sold about 100,000.”[65] A week later, *EW*’s Jeff Jensen reported that *Watchmen*’s

“above-average potential as an ancillary media cash cow was a big reason why Warner Bros. greenlit the picture [...] the studio could milk *Watchmen* for at least three different DVDs: the already-announced *The Black Freighter* companion disc, an animated film based on the graphic novel’s comic-within-a-comic; the theatrical version of the film; and possibly a separate director’s cut [...]”[66]

This narrative of exploitation ran counter to the narrative of *Watchmen*’s “unfilmable” greatness that Jensen had propagated. By October 2008, *Publisher’s Weekly* reported that *Watchmen* had become “the bestselling backlist graphic novel on the planet.”[67] By March 2009, *Watchmen* had become the bestselling trade paperback of any kind in the United States.[68]

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Police detectives investigate the scene of the Comedian's murder in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



Watchmen (Warner Brothers, 2009) un-braids the opening sequence of the graphic novel into two separate scenes that appear in sequence: the murder and the crime-scene investigation. Snyder films the detectives' visit to the scene of the Comedian's murder in a single long take. The camera begins in the apartment, then tracks horizontally outward, suggesting the rising vantage point of the first page of the comic, but without an obvious motivation for the technique beyond allusion-as-fidelity. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



In *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009), the camera reaches its farthest distance from the Comedian's window. The frame contains the Veidt building (right), headquarters of the murderer's conglomerate. However, because the building appears here in profile, even repeat

"I've pretty much done my job"

Why did Warner Brothers hire Zack Snyder to direct the film? Snyder had directed only two features, a remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and a CG-heavy adaptation of Frank Miller's graphic novel *300* (2007). These commercial successes attracted some praise, but nothing like that heaped on the graphic novel *Watchmen*. At the 2008 Comic-Con, Snyder explained how he came to the project. He received a call from Warner Brothers, who

"wanted to ask me if I'd be interested in making this into a movie, and I said, 'Yeah, it's [shakes head] seems like a crazy idea.' But I think that—you know, once they asked me, I kind of felt like—responsible. Even if I said no, they would have moved on, and then whatever happened to the movie, I still would have had my chance, and if I blew it—if the movie, for whatever reason, didn't turn out, I would have—it's still my fault. So I figured I might as well make it my fault anyway." [69]

This lukewarm account would not stop Time Warner from constructing an image of Snyder as a driven *Watchmen* fanatic; the film's press kit claims that Snyder "expressed to the producers his affinity for the graphic novel and desire to direct it." [70] EW's Jensen coaxes answers from Snyder that style him as a fan.

JENSEN: *Watchmen* was published in comic-book form in 1986—but you discovered it in its graphic novel a few years later when you were in college, right? [sic]

SNYDER: I had seen it in the store when it first came out as a comic, but I never got the first issue, and I couldn't get into it at the middle; I felt like I missed it a little bit.

JENSEN: When you finally read it, what did you think?

SNYDER: *Watchmen* is like the music you feel is written just for you." [71]

Watchmen's press kit extends an ethic of fidelity to the cast and crew, whose goal became "to create an experience true to the feeling of the graphic novel." [72] Actor Carla Gugino uses the rhetoric of superheroism: "There was a great amount of responsibility to do it justice." [73] Even Dave Gibbons, who drew *Watchmen*, compliments Snyder's "attention to detail," even to "things I had stuck in the artwork that I hadn't given a second thought to." [74] The precision of Gibbons's illustrations helped the graphic novel achieve its formal density; Gibbons therefore offers high praise when he suggests that the filmmakers have surpassed his attention to detail. The press kit's citation of Gibbons instantiates Gray's claim about making-of paratexts: they "surround the text with aura, and insist on its uniqueness, value, and authenticity." [75] The press kit offers Snyder's production as a new source of aura.

In early 2009, Snyder wrote to an interviewer, "if we help sell 2m more copies of the book by the time the film comes out, I've pretty much done my job." [76] We can best understand Snyder's "job" as the advertising of brands. Of Snyder's feature work, only the commercially weak, critically reviled *Sucker Punch* (2011), which he co-wrote, neither remade an earlier film nor adapted a print text. Snyder began in advertising, where his commercials for clients like Audi, Jeep, Miller, and Sega shortlisted him for four Clio Awards and won him a Bronze. [77] Dark

viewers will probably not recognize its “V” branded shape.







Near the two-hour mark, we get a better view of the Veidt building illuminated at night. Hiding a clue in plain sight, as Moore and Gibbons often do in the *Watchmen* graphic novel, only works if the viewer can recognize that clue on a second viewing. If it takes the viewer of a film three or more viewings plus frame captures to recognize the “clue,” as it took me with *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009), then the technique seems to have failed.

Horse Comics reported that after the release of the trailer for *300*, the publisher “received orders for 40,000 copies of Miller’s graphic novel” that had sold only 88,000 copies in the preceding seven years.[78] Snyder’s glossy mise-en-scène and heavy use of slow motion have more in common with TV commercials than with the violent melodramas of Sam Peckinpah or John Woo, despite superficial resemblances. Even violent sequences in *Watchmen* evoke not action films but the high-contrast, visually iconic features of Adrian Lyne, Ridley Scott, or Tony Scott, who also began in advertising, and who perfected the ancillary-driven “high concept” feature film style that Justin Wyatt analyzes.[79] We might think of Snyder as a director of TV commercials who graduated to directing the most lavish commercials of all: franchise blockbusters.

Watchmen the movie

David Hayter and Alex Tse’s script for *Watchmen* keeps many elements of the book’s story, including sexuality, male nudity, and violence, all of which Snyder elaborates, earning the film’s R rating. The movie quotes visual motifs from the book but eliminates the symmetries that organize chapters, and it disentwines the narrative registers of the book, simplifying both story information (*fabula*) and narrative enunciation (*syuzhet*). For example, the graphic novel’s first two pages present three intertwined narrative registers: captions from the vigilante Rorschach’s journal, police detectives investigating a murder scene, and flashbacks to the murder. The movie separates these three registers and re-plots the story, presenting first the murder, next the detectives, and then Rorschach coming to investigate.

The film opens with the murder. Edward Blake, the retired “mask” known as the Comedian (a Captain America by way of Henry Kissinger), makes himself a cup of tea and sits down to watch TV in his high-rise apartment. After a few minutes of *The McLaughlin Group*, he flips channels until he finds an ad for the perfume Nostalgia, which he sits back to watch.

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| <p>The Comedian watches <i>The McLaughlin</i> group, recreated with actors in <i>Watchmen</i> (Warner Brothers, 2009). This sequence functions as exposition on the geopolitics of the alternate 1980s of its setting.</p> | <p>To spice up this data-dump, Snyder cuts from the TV in the Comedian’s apartment into the studio where the show films. Here, as in long shots throughout the film, the camera tracks slowly in, moving on the Z-axis to enliven the otherwise static.</p> |
|  |  |
| <p>The <i>McLaughlin Group</i> sequence in <i>Watchmen</i> (Warner Brothers, 2009) introduces the nuclear-war doomsday clock central to the iconography of the graphic novel, the film, and DC Comics’s branding of the larger <i>Watchmen</i> franchise. This sequence even cuts into ...</p> | <p>... the production control room. Audiences who paid for a superhero movie might get bored by a political analysis talk show, regardless of its importance as exposition, so Snyder cuts within the space, as if to say, “But look over <i>here</i>....”</p> |
| | |



John McLaughlin as played by Gary Huston in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



Eleanor Clift as played by Mary Ann Burger in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



Pat Buchanan as played by James M. Connor in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



The Comedian, aging masked adventurer, flips channels in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009). Pornography and violence juxtapose on the coffee table.



The Comedian sits forward, restless, as he watches news and analysis of the standoff between the USA and USSR in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



The Comedian relaxes and sits back once he finds something on TV worth watching, a commercial for the perfume Nostalgia, by Veidt. Shot in slow motion and directed by Zack Snyder, the ad resembles the film in which the Comedian appears: *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



A cut to a close up shows the Comedian watching the intradiegetic ad in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



In the first few minutes of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009), Zack Snyder returns to the form where his career as a filmmaker began: the television commercial. Languid slow motion eroticizes both the actors and the commodity



The intradiegetic perfume commercial that comes early in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009) alludes to an image near the end Moore and Gibbons's graphic novel (chapter 12, page 25), when the superhuman Dr. Manhattan walks across the surface of a swimming pool.



A misdirected bullet punctuates the TV ad for Nostalgia by Veidt in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009). Veidt himself has come to murder the Comedian.



Snyder's speed-ramping often slows the fight between the Comedian and his assailant, lingering over the violence in the manner of slow-motion food photography. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



Snyder elaborates and exaggerates the graphic novel's violence at every turn, as when the Comedian, a retired government operative who has no superhuman powers, misses his opponent and punches through the wall of his apartment. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



As the Comedian's attacker hurls him through the window, Snyder ramps the image speed from slow to slower, simultaneously evoking the extreme slow-motion of food-advertising photography and Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia 2: Teil—Fest der Schönheit*. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



An intruder kicks in his door, and they fight at length, but the aging Blake proves no match for his attacker, who hurls him through the window to his death. Snyder elaborates the story at every turn: where Moore and Gibbons show one panel where the Comedian takes a punch and one where he takes a kick, and none where he hits back, Snyder elaborates the fight into a three minute slugfest, in which the Comedian resorts to kitchen knives and a handgun. Speed ramping often slows the image so that we linger over airborne fragments of glass and droplets of blood. In the book, we do not know what programs the Comedian watched before his death, but Snyder supplies them and embellishes the *McLaughlin Group* with multiple, unmotivated shots of the television studio. But the perfume commercial leaves the most lasting impression, because Snyder lets the ad fill the screen and sets it to Nat King Cole's "Unforgettable," which then plays throughout the fight.

Snyder here celebrates the medium where he began. When the Comedian finds the perfume commercial, he relaxes. Though he has been leaning forward, now he leans back, savoring Snyder's intradiegetic ad: a beautiful woman lounges beside a pool before a mansion, and a chiseled man wearing only white trunks walks across the water of the pool in slow motion. The ad shows inventiveness here in three ways. First, the Comedian knows the identity of the intruder (although the audience does not) as an "unforgettable" old associate. Second, the ad for "Nostalgia by Veidt" names the intruder: Veidt himself. Third, in that the water-walking hunk echoes a composition in the final chapter of the graphic novel, where the nude, godlike Dr. Manhattan walks on water. When the Comedian shoots at Veidt, he hits the TV instead, but "Unforgettable" swells to become the extradiegetic score of the fight, running from 2:27 to 5:27 and even following the camera to the pavement with the Comedian's body. It runs much longer than in the 1990 ad for Revlon's "Unforgettable" fragrance, which starred Cindy Crawford, and which intercut footage of Cole with slow-motion footage of Crawford.[80] Despite the elements of wit in the intradiegetic perfume ad, the sequence also reminds us of Snyder's *modus operandi* for Warner Brothers: he makes characters look good by flattening even complex source material into fetishized surfaces. As Hoberek remarks of the film's reworking of the book's opening, "the effect is precisely that of the boilerplate superhero story that [the graphic novel] seeks to complicate." [81]

As Cole's song plays, the slow-motion cinematography aestheticizes the fight, translating the damage both to the combatants and to the Comedian's apartment into the idiom of slow-motion food photography. In the 1970s, Elbert Budin employed high-speed cameras that would capture food falling, tumbling, or splattering.[82] Called "tabletop" cinematography in the advertising industry, directors devise elaborate contraptions to hurl food through the air:

"A spring-loaded arm launched an open box quickly upward while a heavy-duty camera—looking and sounding like an outboard motor as it recorded hundreds of frames per second—captured, in super-slow-motion, each flake's balletic arc." [83]

With musical accompaniment, slow motion evokes languor:

"the images are almost erotic. Which is no accident. 'You're using the same part of your brain—porn, food,' [tabletop director Michael] Schrom says during a break. 'It's going in the same section; it's that visual cortex that connects to your most basic senses. What we're trying to do is be the modern-day Pavlovs and ring your bell with these images.'" [84]

When digital blood finally splatters from the Comedian's mouth onto his smiley-face badge—the book's most iconic image—it therefore recalls not only the flying sauces of restaurant ads but also the "money shots" of pornography. Many

The Comedian's blood-spattered badge, the *Watchmen* franchise's logo, falls in slow motion toward the street in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).

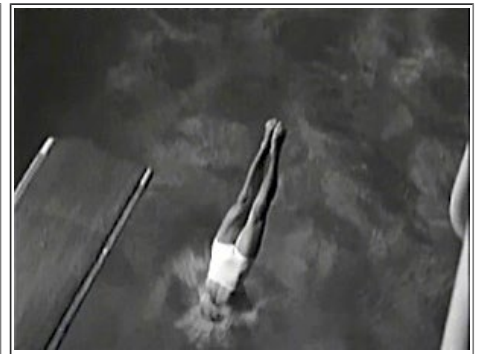


The graphic novel never shows the Comedian's remains, but Snyder's camera follows the smiley badge down to the pavement and turns the Comedian's dead body into a glossy, high-contrast image appropriate for a wristwatch or luxury car advertisement in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).

commentators discussing *300* remarked on its slow-motion eroticization of nearly nude Spartan warriors; in his analysis, Robert A. Rushing notes that the human figure in slow motion "usually signifies a kind of muscular ecstasy, a hallucinatory extension of speed and strength." [85] I would argue that Snyder's slow motion reveals an ecstasy not of the character but of the commodity. When the Comedian falls from his high-rise window, we see a proprietary character describe an arc that we might graph somewhere between the divers of *Olympia* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1938) and the bran flakes, strawberries, and milk plummeting toward their encounter in an idealized bowl.



Snyder films Time Warner's proprietary characters in heroic slow motion evocative of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia 2: Teil—Fest der Schönheit* (Taurus, 1938).



The athlete meets the water *Olympia 2: Teil—Fest der Schönheit* (Taurus, 1938).



Snyder's TV spot for perfume in *Watchmen* recalls this diver from *Olympia 2: Teil—Fest der Schönheit* (Taurus, 1938).



The diver abstracted from and elevated above humanity in *Olympia 2: Teil—Fest der Schönheit* (Taurus, 1938).



Zack Snyder films the war room of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009) as a seeming homage to *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Despite marketing claims about its fidelity to its graphic novel source, Snyder's film often alludes to texts not referenced in the graphic novel if that allows him to reference something famous. The war room in the graphic novel more closely resembles that of *Wargames* (1983), but *Wargames* does not provide the same prestige

Snyder's DC films trap heroes in the slowed temporality of high frame rates, fetishizing them in both the Marxian and paraphilic senses, as rippling monuments to a corporate will to manufacture brand loyalty. Cole's "Unforgettable" seems to refer, with all its love and nostalgia, to the Comedian as a DC property. The unforgettable character stars in an ad for a book—now an ad for a franchise—that begins with an image of his blood.

After the Comedian's death, the film's slow-motion credits begin, the one sequence that met widespread praise from critics. A series of twenty-two tableaux of characters from the graphic novel appear with credits beside or around them. Little diegetic sound accompanies, muted by time and distance, while over all plays Bob Dylan's "The Times They are A' Changin'". This montage presents some events narrated in the book's comic panel sections (like the handshake between President Kennedy and Dr. Manhattan) and some events narrated in the chapter epilogues (like the psychiatric commitment of Mothman). However, many insert *Watchmen* characters into iconic scenes from the 20th century, offering visual analogues to the alternate history within the graphic novel. These wordless, slow-motion tableaux resemble TV commercials not only at the level of cinematography (slow motion) and mise en scène (idealized human figures, gestures accentuated),

or high-contrast mise en scène as Kubrick's.



Watchmen (Warner Brothers, 2009) puts Richard Nixon, still president in the 1980s, in a war room with mise en scène quoted from *Dr. Strangelove*.

but also at the discursive levels of cultural citation and commercial address. By revising iconic photos and films—*VJ Day in Times Square*, the Zapruder Film, and so on—the sequence makes each tableau function doubly as an adaptation of *Watchmen* story material and of other, unnamed works. The credits sequence both formally resembles and also functions as a five-minute, high-budget commercial for *Watchmen*.

My students laughed at Snyder's riff on the moment captured in Alfred Eisenstaedt's 1945 photo, *VJ Day in Times Square*: the Silhouette, a lesbian crime-fighter, cuts off the sailor and kisses the nurse into a swoon. My students did not realize that *Life* magazine ran the photo, and that its copyright belongs to Time Inc., or that for \$74.95, Time will sell you an 11"x14" print with a "certificate of authenticity." [86] Provided one does not read Snyder's VJ Day tableau as cross-promotion for Time Warner intellectual property, then Snyder's take on the kiss does seem irreverent and bold insofar as it revises Eisenstaedt's image against the grain of postwar U.S. heteronormativity and the impending baby boom. However, this tableau also reads as a gratuitous girl-on-girl shot from a filmmaker whose politics tend toward the reactionary, and not just in the leering *Sucker Punch* or *300*, which Rushing calls an "incredibly nationalistic, misogynist, ableist, and homophobic film." [87]



In the celebrated opening credits of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009), Snyder introduces the Silhouette, lesbian crimefighter of the 1940s. Much as the graphic novel revises the 20th century to write costumed adventurers into US history, the film adaptation of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009) revises those costumed adventurers into iconic images ...



... such as Alfred Eisenstaedt's 1945 photo, *VJ Day in Times Square*. Here, the Silhouette ambushes the erotically-available nurse. Time, Inc., corporate sibling of Warner Brothers and DC Comics, owns the copyright to Eisenstaedt's photo.



Snyder punctuates the slow-motion credits sequence with flash photography, reminding us of the stillness of the iconic images that he transforms here, while simultaneously highlighting the motion of these tableaux vivants. From *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



A slow-motion tableau in the credits sequence of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009) shows us the capture of Mothman, narrated verbally but not visually in the book. Note the photographer, flash at the ready.



The graphic novel tells us verbally of the Silhouette's murder, but gives no details about the manner of her death. In the opening credits *Watchmen* (Warner



The opening credits of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009) imagines the vigilante Nite Owl as the subject of a painting by Andy Warhol.

Brothers, 2009) Zack Snyder renders the tableau as something like snuff porn.



The opening credits of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009) re-create not just the Kennedy assassination, but the view of the Zapruder film, which Time, Inc. owned in the 1960s and 1970s. The camera pans right so that our view follows President Kennedy's limousine across Dealey Plaza. The pan continues to the slat fence on the grassy knoll, revealing the Comedian as a (or *the*) shooter, a possibility only hinted at in the graphic novel (chapter 9, page 20).



In the *Watchmen* graphic novel (chapter 5, page 10), we see the Gunga Diner as Moore and Gibbons imagine it. Worn furniture, oozy squeeze bottles, paper cups, lack of table service, and disposable food cartons all signify downscale fast food. Photo by the author.



The film adaptation of *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009) presents a clean and roomy restaurant with china dishes, glass containers for condiments, and table service. Here, Dan Driberg prepares to settle the bill just delivered by a uniformed waitress. Director Zack Snyder treats even fictional brands with reverence.

Just four tableaux after Snyder's VJ Day kiss, Snyder shows us the lingerie-clad, bloodied corpses of the Silhouette and the nurse sprawled on a bed; on the wall over them the killer has smeared "LESBIAN WHORES" in blood. Beside the bed stand a male cop and a male crime-scene photographer who trips (in slow-motion) a flashbulb. The graphic novel tells of the murder in words only and gives no lurid details about the manner of death.[88] In contrast, Snyder arranges the corpses in an eroticized tableau over which our gaze, the camera's, and those of an intradiegetic male photographer all linger. Where the book critiques the other costumed heroes' lack of solidarity with the Silhouette, the movie gives us something like snuff.

Snyder's choice of "The Times They are A' Changin'" telegraphs not only the hollowness of the film's version of the book's cultural critiques but also the film's aim for the lowest common denominator. No Dylan song has wider recognition than "The Times," covered by musicians ranging from D.O.A. to Billy Joel, from Cher to Flatt & Scruggs. Its ubiquity derives as much from the vivid imagery of Dylan's lyrics as from their ambiguity. Unlike "Solidarity Forever," "The Internationale," or "The Horst Wessel Song," Dylan's lyrics offer no political content, only opportunities to have feelings about political action; a Young Republican, a Red Guard, and a Klansman could all read in Dylan's lyrics "a song written," to use Snyder's cliché, "just for them." Throughout *Watchmen*, Snyder adds songs not cited in the graphic novel, most of them both nostalgic (to 2009 audiences) and, like "Unforgettable," famous unto exhaustion: Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence," Jimi Hendrix's cover of "All Along the Watchtower," Nena's "99 Luftballons." Yet these other songs have not been criticized as evidence of their creators' "selling out" as has the Dylan track. Moreover, in a moment of prescience, the graphic novel foresaw this song's fate: in the epilogue of chapter eleven, Moore quotes the song's title in an ad for the perfume Nostalgia by Veidt, appearing in a magazine owned by Veidt's conglomerate.[89] Snyder chooses the same song as the book's villain.

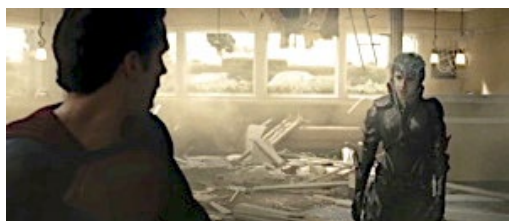
In 1985, Dylan had denounced "stock-broker rock" and the use of grassroots music forms in television advertising as a "big establishment thing." [90] He therefore met scorn when he licensed "The Times They are A-Changin'" to multinational accounting firm Coopers & Lybrand in 1994. Michael Gray's *Dylan Encyclopedia* calls the firm "a deeply unsavory organization that anyone with a serviceable moral radar would have known to avoid." [91] In 1993 and 1994 the company had come under investigation for unethical and illegal dealings in Britain, so to help reform their public image, they paid for "a song only heeded in the first place because of its political integrity." [92] Had Dylan taken a solitary misstep, one might forgive him and the song, but in 1996 he licensed it to Bank of



Snyder's film revises the Gunga Diner from the dirty fast-food restaurant of the graphic novel, source of ubiquitous trash that litters the streets of the neighborhood, into a mid-range, retro-styled diner in *Watchmen* (Warner Brothers, 2009).



Superman and Faora, evil Kryptonian, land in an International House of Pancakes in *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013). They crash through the front wall so we can see the sign.



Superman confronts Faora in the IHOP in *Man of Steel* (Warner Brothers, 2013), with the IHOP globe logo visible over her shoulder.



The IHOP manager gets a close-up as Kryptonians fight in his restaurant in *Man of Steel* (Warner Brothers, 2013), company logo again visible in the upper right.

Montreal, provoking widespread ridicule and disgust. [93] Then in 2005 Dylan licensed the song to Kaiser Permanente, a health insurance company trying to reform its image against a campaign of class-action lawsuits in the 2000s.[94] Blogger Alec Hanley Bemis calls Dylan's relationship to 1960s activism "at least partially opportunistic; the most important aspect of his participation in the protest movement was that it helped align his art with the interests and experiences of his generation." [95] For many, "The Times They are A-Changin'" signifies the direct action of the Civil Rights Movement and resistance to the Vietnam War, yet for over two decades it has also signified Dylan's readiness to collaborate in the image-management of corporations.

In Snyder's films, even fictional commodities and companies look gorgeous. Readers of the graphic novel would expect the strenuously faithful *Watchmen* to depict the Gunga Diner tandoori fast-food chain as it appears in the book: patrons eat with their hands from greasy cartons, next to squeeze bottles with condiments oozing down their sides.[96] However, Snyder presents a clean, retro-styled diner with table service, china dishes, and condiments in glass bottles. Many of the film's revisions of the book's story information seem motivated by an urge to depict something told but not shown in the comic, like the historical tableaux, while others seem motivated by concerns about running time, like the elimination of the monster in favor of an elegant frame-up of Dr. Manhattan. However, Snyder's revision of the Gunga Diner seems motivated instead by franchisor-franchisee diplomacy and brand marketability—not for *Watchmen*, but for Warner Brothers. After the 2008 financial crisis,

"Low- and mid-priced chain restaurants are one of the few segments of the economy that [spent] as much or more on advertising than they did in the years before. [...] Fast-food, casual-dining and pizza chains [...] spent \$300 million more on TV ads in 2010 than they did in 2007." [97]

Warner Brothers licenses tie-ins with restaurants, so they have reason to avoid depicting even fictional chains as Moore does, physical and visual polluters of urban space. Snyder's next DC film, *Man of Steel* (2013), gives a prominent role to a real-life diner chain, International House of Pancakes:

"moviegoers will notice a surprising corporate co-star: IHOP (DIN) [98] the restaurant is mentioned by name during a key sequence and a fierce battle unfolds between Superman and Faora, General Zod's deadly sidekick, in the chain's Smallville outpost. While he wouldn't discuss the restaurant's contractual agreement with Warner Brothers (TWX), [IHOP spokesman Craig] Hoffman fielded a few questions about the restaurant chain's curious prominence in the film, and what it means for pancake sales.

BLOOMBERG: How did IHOP get involved?

HOFFMAN: Well, first of all, I should say that as a recognizable brand with recognizable restaurants. We're approached a lot about filming opportunities. In this case, we just felt, 'We're an iconic American brand, and this is an iconic American story.' So we were happy to cooperate. [...] We just asked that they don't disparage the brand in the script." [99]

Snyder's Gunga Diner scenes could play as a demo reel to cross-promotion partners like IHOP, Bob Evans, or Denny's. The latter, after all, partnered with Warner Brothers in 2012 for a Middle-Earth-themed menu to promote Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* films; *Advertising Age* called the partnership that produced the "Build Your Own Hobbit Slam" one of Denny's "biggest-ever movie tie-ins." [100] Snyder's films abandon both darkness and fidelity when either would conflict with cross-promotion.



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Producer Lloyd Levin says, “*Watchmen*, the graphic novel, is always going to be there. It was all of our job to try to create the analogous movie-going experience.” From “The Phenomenon: The Comic that Changed Comics” (Warner Home Video, 2009).

“Making *Watchmen* a movie experience.”

Despite the film’s many revisions of its source, reviewers hurled back the marketing’s rhetoric: “*Watchmen*’s biggest problem, ironically, is that it’s too faithful.”[101] The movie “takes loyalty to new limits. And that’s exactly what’s wrong with it.”[102] Many called Snyder’s fidelity “slavish.”[103] The reviews confirm George Bluestone’s 1957 observation: “Whenever a film becomes a financial or even a critical success, the question of ‘faithfulness’ is given hardly any thought.”[104] The marketing had worked too hard to court perceived fans of the comic.

Scholars have tended to discuss the film in terms of its adaptation of the book. Liam Burke contrasts its marketing with that of 20th Century Fox’s adaptation of *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Stephen Norrington, 2003): “Unlike *The League*, fidelity was fetishized at each turn in the production and promotion of *Watchmen*.”[105] Bob Rehak argues that the movie “embodied the many paradoxes of contemporary blockbuster film production, so capable of outré visualization yet so constrained in its operations.”[106] Rehak also calls the film “fanservice with a \$120 million budget.”[107] Anime fans use the term *fanservice* to refer to media creators’ gratuitous attempts to please their imagined core audience, especially at the expense of momentum or plausibility; I would therefore disagree with Rehak’s characterization, in that I read the *Watchmen* not as an attempt to serve fans of the book but to serve an intellectual property holder by expanding the audience for that property. We could therefore better describe the film as *brandservice*, an attempt to recruit new customers for *Watchmen* commodities.

Those commodities included the six different *Watchmen* home videos that Warner Premiere had developed:

- a 163-minute theatrical cut;
- a 186-minute “director’s cut”;
- a disc containing anime and live-action films based on intradiegetic texts from the graphic novel;
- a 215-minute “Ultimate Cut,” which integrated the anime and other footage; and finally,
- *Watchmen: the Complete Motion Comic*, which digitized parts of the comic-panel sections of the book (but not the epilogues) in the manner of a self-reading pop-up book.



The case of the 215-minute “ultimate” cut riffs on the film’s version of the book’s blood-spattered smiley to create two new *Watchmen* logos. Photo by the author.

As producer Deborah Snyder, wife of director Zack Snyder, explains in the film’s press kit, *Watchmen*

“has always been more than the sum of its parts. There were aspects we knew we couldn’t include entirely—like *Under the Hood* [...] and *Tales of the Black Freighter*—but we knew we could do something with these ancillary bits on the DVD. For Zack, the key for doing this massive project was to always stay true to the graphic novel.”[108]

Deborah Snyder works backwards from the planned product line to a reading of the source text, such that integral parts of the book become “ancillary.” Her claim about *Watchmen* as “more than the sum of its parts” pays lip service to the book as an integral whole, but her implication that parts can be excised and re-packaged undercuts that idea. *Watchmen: Tales of the Black Freighter* appeared on 24 March 2009, while *Watchmen* still screened in theaters. Special features include a featurette, “Story within a Story: The Books of *Watchmen*,” in which executive producer Lloyd Levin explains:

“*Watchmen*, the graphic novel, is always going to be there. It was all of our job to try to create the analogous movie-going experience. So in handling the supporting material, as a *Black Freighter* anime, or an *Under the Hood* documentary, finds the perfect tone for making *Watchmen* a movie experience.”[109] [sic]

Levin, like Deborah Snyder, treats integral parts of the book as “supporting material,” parts of an “experience” composed of many commodities.

In the DVD featurette “Phenomenon: the Comic that Changed Comics,” which came with the director’s and Ultimate cuts, former DC president Jenette Kahn claims that aesthetic and ethical concerns motivated DC. “We really felt very strongly that the medium allowed for the most sophisticated stories,” she says, “the most offbeat stories, the most independent stories.”[110] One can only guess what *independent* might mean in this context; maybe Kahn means smaller comics publishers like Wildstorm, which DC later bought, and which Moore left again in disgust. Kahn calls the Charlton characters “the inspiration originally, but *Watchmen* became a thing of its own.”[111] She writes Moore out of this process, turning *Watchmen* into a generative force. Against Kahn’s claim, I would argue



Jenette Kahn, president of DC comics from 1981 to 2002, “The Phenomenon: The Comic that Changed Comics” (Warner Home Video, 2009).

that under her leadership, DC turned *Watchmen* from a thing potentially of Moore and Gibbons's own into a thing DC's own. Nowhere in "Phenomenon" does Kahn mention licensing, or DC's strategy of using top artists to generate intellectual property for the conglomerate, or the circumstances of Moore's departure from the company.



These ads for other *Watchmen* products came in the cases of the DVDs spun off from the film. Photo by the author.

Each DVD case contains ads for the Deadline Games' *Watchmen: The End is Nigh* computer game (for Sony's PlayStation 3 and Microsoft's Xbox 360) and various Warner Home Video releases, as well as an ad for the graphic novel itself. The latter calls the book "the runaway bestseller!" and draws blurbs from Jensen's "Watchmen: An Oral History" in *Entertainment Weekly*, and Grossman's entry for *Time*'s hundred-novels list. A photo shows the trade paperback, the hardcover, and *Absolute Watchmen*. The theatrical release had boosted sales of the *Absolute* edition, and now the videos aimed to buoy them.[112] According to DC's website, *Absolute Watchmen*

"will be the cornerstone of any serious comic book collection. Each page of art has been restored and recolored by WildStorm FX and original series colorist John Higgins and approved by Gibbons to appear as originally intended. Additionally, this grand tome will include 48 pages of supplemental material [...] rare and historically valuable treasures, including samples of Moore's *Watchmen* scripts, the original *Watchmen* proposal, Gibbons's conceptual art, cover roughs, and much, much more!"[113]

Not even the trade paperback can compete with such fullness. *Absolute Watchmen* offers rarity and historicity, origins and intentions: a (mechanically reproduced) *Watchmen* reliquary.

In 2009 DC released a promotional booklet, *After Watchmen... What's Next?* Its yellow-on-black cover bears a design that merges the smiley-face badge and doomsday clock motifs from *Watchmen*, but this clock shows five minutes *after* midnight. The inside front cover bears an ad for the three print editions of



The cover of the free advertising booklet *After Watchmen...What's Next?* presents the book's doomsday clock motif showing a time after nuclear midnight. The self-contained text of *Watchmen*, the cover suggests, need not end. Photo by the author.

Watchmen, “the only graphic novel selected as one of *Time* magazine’s 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to the present.”[114] This ad also includes a plug for “one of the most hotly anticipated motion pictures” of 2009, Snyder’s adaptation.[115] However, the first page of the booklet proper makes a sales pitch not for the range brand, *Watchmen*, but for the corporate brand, DC. The booklet compiles full-page and double-page ads for twenty graphic novels that “answer the question” of the title, advertising four of Alan Moore’s books (more than any other writer’s), as well as Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman*, and Brian K. Vaughan’s *Y: The Last Man*:

“Each award-winning, best-selling title reflects an aspect of *Watchmen*’s broad appeal, and is a great entry point for new fans just discovering graphic novels as well as established readers looking to try something new. [...] Experience the unique storytelling power of graphic novels from DC Comics, the #1 publisher with the most diverse line of titles in the industry.”[116]

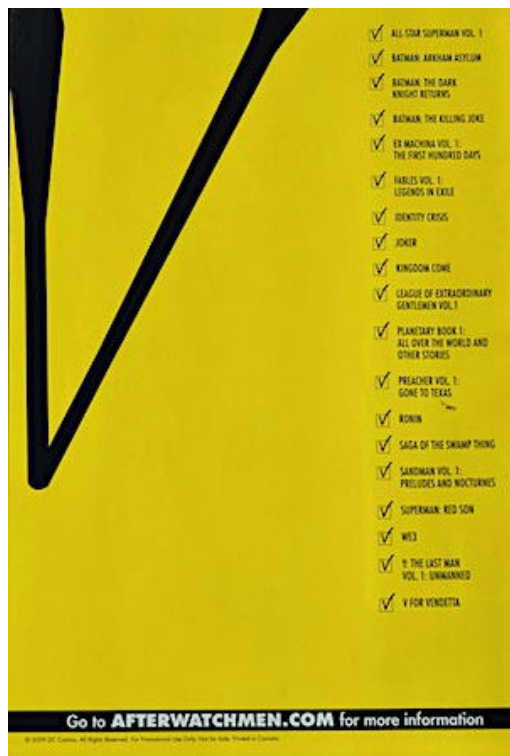
Here, a booklet with a cover modeled on Moore and Gibbons’s work for hire deploys that work in service of the corporate brand. Midnight has come and gone, but the monster remains: dead, but still broadcasting its message.



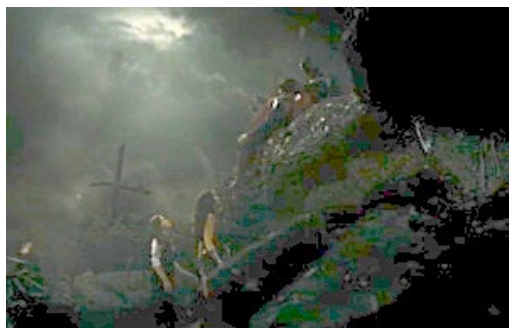
The inside cover of *After Watchmen...What's Next?* repeats the company line about the book’s excellence but culminates in a claim about DC’s excellence as a corporate brand, “the #1 publisher with the most diverse line of titles in the industry.” Photo by the author.

Conclusion: the corporate pietà

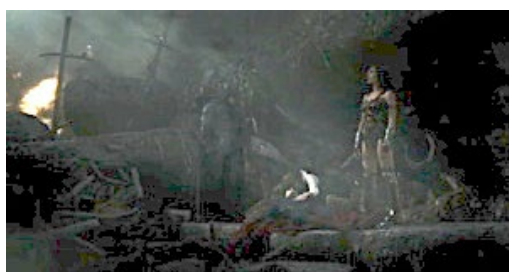
Before 1986, the duopoly avoided killing characters because corporations don’t kill sources of profit. Moore and Gibbons sought freedom from this, and they negotiated both greater autonomy as artists and also potential ownership as creators. By opening *Watchmen* with the death of a superhero, Moore and Gibbons signaled what they took as their freedom from DC’s managerial norm that treated all characters as revenue streams. Since the mid 1980s however, the duopoly has used character death as a marketing tool, most infamously with the 1992 “Death of Superman” arc, which generated record sales. In this series, Superman dies only to return to life some issues later. *Batman v Superman* performs this reversal in its final minutes: after Superman dies defending the Earth, Lois Lane holds his corpse as Batman and Wonder Woman look on in a corporate pietà, a sorrowful guarantee of resurrection. Just before the credits roll,



The back cover of *After Watchmen...What's Next?* converts the after-midnight hands of the doomsday clock into a check mark, inviting potential readers to check off other comics from DC. Photo by the author.



Batman lowers Superman, killed in action, from this Golgotha, complete with a utility-pole cross, in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Warner Brothers, 2016).



we see dirt rising into the air above Superman's coffin, surprising nobody familiar with the duopoly's strategies.

Yet the moment in *DC Universe: Rebirth* when Batman finds the Comedian's badge does surprise, for it breaks with the company's precedent of keeping *Watchmen* self-contained. The decision to integrate the book's characters into the rest of the DC universe seems to erode the distinctiveness of the *Watchmen* range brand, but maybe DC has become desperate to regain its footing in the superhero marketplace now dominated by the Disney-owned Marvel. Batman's discovery of the badge retroactively converts the Comedian's death into a marketing stunt like the "Death of Superman," and it converts the self-contained and industry-defying elements of *Watchmen* into merely temporary provisions. *Watchmen* becomes, in hindsight, DC's joke, played on audiences and work for hire artists alike.

In his 1940 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Clement Greenberg wrote, "Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard." [117] In the history of the *Watchmen* media franchise, such a division applies, with Moore and Gibbons as the advance guard, working to expand the formal horizons of superhero comics, and with Zack Snyder as the rear guard, simplifying and domesticating their work to serve corporate goals. Moore turned a form widely seen as commercial and instrumental into something relatively autonomous and self-contained, but Snyder turned Moore's work back toward the commercial and instrumental, adapting it to the idioms of television advertising. Greenberg notes the temporal dimension of the relation between the avant-garde and kitsch:

"The precondition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends. It borrows from it devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system, and discards the rest. [...] when enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new 'twists,' which are then watered down and served up as kitsch." [118]

Snyder's film discarded both the book's politics and its formal complexities, reducing it instead to an advertisement for the book. Then in 2016, *DC Universe: Rebirth* used that book as a means to inject novelty into "Golden Age" properties like Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman.

Yet the narrative that I have presented here only emerges if we read against the grain of the conglomerate's marketing campaign, and only if we examine corporate utterances against their contexts, both in the temporal dimension of *Watchmen*'s emergence from Hollywood development hell, and also in the spatial dimension of Time Warner's network of properties, corporate and intellectual, news and entertainment. To use the idiom of comic-book layout, we cannot confine our attention to the single panel or the single page when trying to understand something as complex as a media conglomerate's franchise. We must instead correlate information scattered in different chapters, even chapters that do not appear to belong to the text.

If my suspicion of Time Warner seems paranoid, then maybe media scholars need a little paranoia: we owe it to our students and to our fellow workers to adopt suspicious, resistant stances toward the secretive, profit-seeking, and

Lois Lane weeps over Superman's corpse beside Wonder Woman in Time Warner's superhero piet  at the end of *Batman v Superman* (Warner Brothers, 2016).

undemocratic corporations that produce and own so much of the culture we inhabit. The optimism of Nite Owl may help us get to sleep, but the pessimism of the stinking, fascist Rorschach can help us resist the commodification of our pleasures and our virtues. A little paranoia can help us see through corporate attempts to hide exploitation behind rhetorics of creativity and fidelity, truth and justice.



You'll Believe a Brand Can Die™: Superman gets a state funeral at the end of *Batman v Superman* (Warner Brothers, 2016), but the film makes clear that he won't stay dead.

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Notes

1. Within the division of labor of the 1980s comics industry, the *penciller* draws, while the *inker* or *colorist* fills in color to the line drawings, and a *letterer* hand-letters word balloons and captions. Gibbons collaborated closely with Moore on multiple drafts of character and architectural designs. I therefore call him *penciller* rather than artist or illustrator to distinguish his contribution to *Watchmen* from the contribution of colorist John Higgins, who added color only to the finished pages.
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ASMR: auratic encounters and women's affective labor

by [Laura Jaramillo](#)

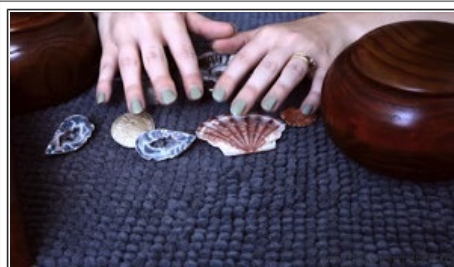
[Editors' note: For readers first encountering the genre, listening to a few minutes of this ASMR video without judgment might help to understand what is meant here by sonic materiality and embodied intimacy in this context: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yz9fl3yzF0E&t=29s>]



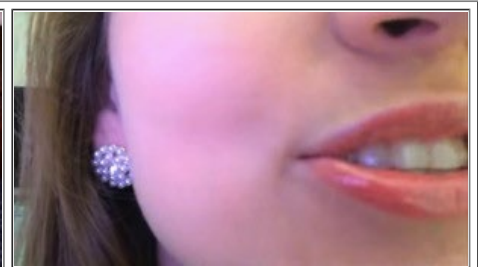
ASMR-tist Pelagea performs the “personal attention” sub-genre of ASMR video in which she compliments the viewer in a whisper. Most of the roles that female ASMR-tists play on camera revolve around care work, usually gendered feminine. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SIFSEkLLew>

Introduction

In ASMR videos, predominantly women perform simple tasks or vocalize softly into the camera in order to arouse a tingling, euphoric sensation at the base of the skull and around the sides of the viewer's face—this is what is described as ASMR (The initials stand for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response.) By focusing on the most popular scenario, in which performers enact traditionally female-gendered affective labor, I analyze how ASMR uses the materiality of sound recording to presence the body of the performer. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's famous concept of aura and contemporary theories of media embodiment, this essay tracks how a seemingly marginal Internet practice like ASMR can serve as a temporary reparative to the somatic damage inflicted on the body by increasing dependence on technology. Because not everyone is susceptible to ASMR's effect, the practice can seem odd to those first encountering it. These videos can strike even those susceptible to ASMR as gratingly awkward to watch because of the way that the subculture plays with mediated social intimacy, feminine gender performance, and therapeutic discourses in a way that is neither wholly chaste nor wholly erotic, and quite idiosyncratic.



ASMR performer The WaterWhispers demonstrates her shell collection, running her hands over the shells to elicit soft scraping and clinking noises. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yz9fl3yzF0E&t=29s>



ASMR Darling whispers in very extreme close-up to the camera, to emphasize the word “relaxing” as she monologues to the camera. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjjRob97lko&t=11s>

In this brief introduction, I attempt to broaden the theoretical frame for understanding ASMR, pointing to its resonances with both older and more



A recent episode of Netflix documentary series about the pornography industry *Hot Girls Wanted*, explores the relationship between cam girl Alice and her long-standing client, Tom. The show exposes the emotional problems that arise for both performer and client from the sense fostered by the webcam and the cam interfaces that the performer is perpetually present to satisfy the customer's sexual and emotional needs. Here, Alice and her friend perform on camera per the request of a client.
<https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/hot-girls-wanted-turned-on-episode-5-recap-take-me-private>



Above: Rosalind Krauss uses Bengalis' 1973 video, "Now" as an example of how narcissism is video's medium (rather than the reverse). Here, according to Krauss, Bengalis reinforces the ambiguous temporality of video through the doubling of the artists' face in the frame and repetition of the word "now."
<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/25/lives-in-exchange>

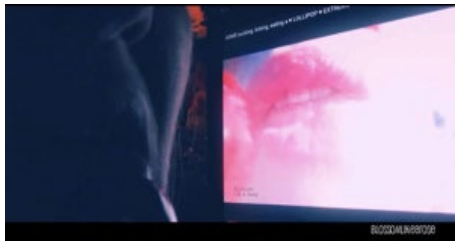
contemporary cultural forms like pornography, early video art, and therapeutic practices. ASMR's relation to pornography is the subject of much speculation, a curiosity which I both acknowledge and try to move beyond in this essay. ASMR shares important features with two pornographic forms, namely the commercial phone sex industry's eroticization of the embodied voice and the contemporary cam girl genre's mobilization of affective labor and performers' self-branding. Commercial phone sex lines, which reached their heyday in the 1980's and have fizzled out with the ascendancy of Internet pornography, offered per-minute rates to talk to women who would create and engage in fantasy scenarios for the caller. Commercial phone sex is unique in terms of pornographic practices because rather than depending on the visible for its erotic charge, it plays on the anonymous disembodied erotic materiality of the performer's voice.[1] [[open endnotes page in new window](#)]



This 1991 sex chat line commercial plays on the eroticization of the disembodied voice by showing an anonymous lithe woman writhing in a window in silhouette. A few frames later, two attractive women dance, one behind a chain link fence and one in front it, suggesting to the potential client that these disembodied voices have real life embodied correlates that can transcend physical distance and architectural barriers.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKdlb5yv5xo>

Cam girls, who cultivate branded personas, performing sexual acts in exchange for money on a live webcam feed, offer a much more traditionally pornographic code of visual representation that relies on what Linda Williams calls "the frenzy of the visible." [2] For our interests in this essay, the most notable parallel between cam girls and ASMR-tists is the unique temporal and spatial sense imparted by the webcam or cell phone: the fantasy of the performer being perpetually *there* for the viewer, framed and ready to perform emotional labor, whether it be therapeutic or pornographic.

This sense of self-branding and perpetual presence common to ASMR and cam girl porn is also intimately tied to the aesthetics of the video medium, which Rosalind Krauss identifies as inherently narcissistic.[3] Because video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time, it is able to produce an instant feedback in which the performer finds themselves infinitely reproduced between camera and monitor, so that the *self* becomes an increasingly tautological and atemporal object of reflection.[4] If Krauss found this to be the salient quality of late 70's video art, exemplified by the early video works of Lynda Bengalis and Vito Acconci,[5] this tendency has only grown with digital culture and the mass availability of cell phone cameras. As a result, the selfie can now be understood as a dominant, contemporary cultural form. ASMR performers' ways of figuring themselves in the diegesis of their videos—in extreme close-up, from flattering angles, in ways that affirm temporal immediacy and presence over broader cultural and historical context—are intimately tied to the visual and affective codes of the selfie.



ASMR performer blossomlikearose eats a lollipop in extreme close-up while a candy-colored YouTube video of herself eating a lollipop plays in the background. The auto-erotic quality, repetitions, and sense of continuous temporality that Krauss identified as native to video art are very much at play here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBzUG1P3uw0>

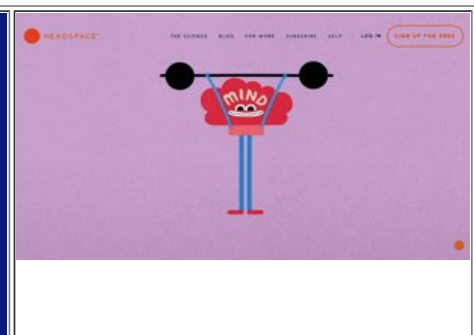


Kim Kardashian has become an avatar for selfie culture. The [cover of her book of self-portraits](#), "Selfish," exemplifies the kinesthetic framing that seems to give her body and face an exaggerated sense of almost-prosthetic perfection.

According to its viewers and performers, ASMR comes closest to a therapeutic practice, an assessment I ultimately agree with though for slightly less obvious reasons than that the videos often enact therapeutic scenarios. In its technology-free aspect, the voice in ASMR is the traditional voice of the therapist, social worker, mother, kindergarten teacher, best friend, even of the soothing robot voice of the iPhone's "Siri." For all of the West's traditional devaluations of the auditory dimension over the visual, the voice, particularly the disembodied voice, does seem to retain its status as a locus of both authority and comfort. In its technological aspect, ASMR also exemplifies the tendency to turn technological media into therapeutic tools, exemplified by the recent preponderance of meditation apps like Headspace; psychotherapy offered through cell phone text message based services like Talkspace; and hundreds of YouTube channels dedicated to music that promises bring to either focus or relaxation (or focused relaxation).[6]



This still from a promotional animation for Talkspace implies that happiness indeed does have a price and that price is being able to afford psychotherapy.



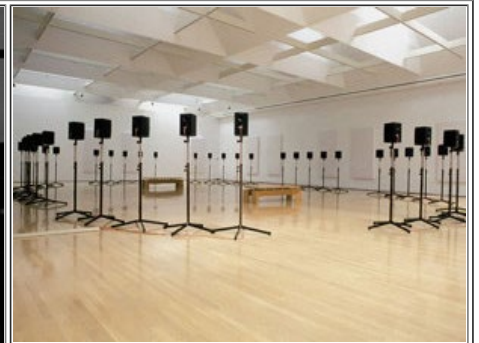
This still from a promotional animation for the meditation app Headspace presents meditation as a form of cognitive training. The cute image of the cotton candy-like brain lifting weights drives home the idea that brains can be weak or they can train to get strong and the choice is in the consumer's hands.
<https://www.headspace.com/>

The ever expanding role of therapeutic discourses and tools in our culture points not only to the tremendous stress that the average person faces, but to the eroding ability of an increasingly economically precarious and socially isolated population to access in-person kinship networks capable of providing care or even of health insurance to subsidize affordable psychotherapeutic assistance.[7] In light of these larger social fractures, I argue that the care offered by ASMR serves a legitimately important, though also totally mediated, function, for its users in its capacity to make the embodied presence of the performer palpable for the user.

Finally, ASMR enters the field at a moment when a number of artists, sound engineers, and scholars have turned to sound as an important object of cultural inquiry. In the past ten years, there has been a spate of critical interest in how sound plays into questions of embodiment, power, and space.[8] As a result, the works of feminist sound artists like Pauline Oliveros, Eliane Radigue, Janet Cardiff, to name just a few, are enjoying a renewed visibility.



Early experimental electronic musician Pauline Oliveros developed a practice called “deep listening,” which emphasized that the ability to listen to ambient noise was as important as the ability to listen to composed music. She developed a number of exercises and activities around the idea of deep listening.

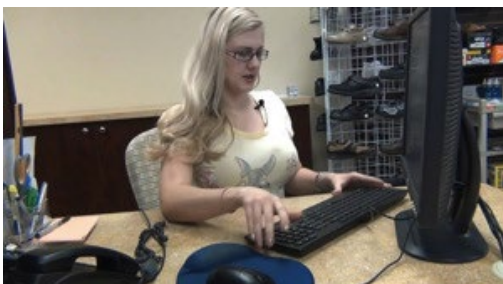


Sound artist Janet Cardiff’s “The Forty Part Motet” plays “Hope in any other” on forty different speakers fitted with movement sensors activated by the viewer’s proximity. The piece links listening with kinesthetic movement, allowing the listener to experience sound as multi-layered and interactive. Audio recording’s capacity to produce kinesthetic sensations have become a rich field of inquiry in the turn towards sound studies.

Through an archive of aesthetic practices and critique too vast to fully name here, the idea that listening can be an ethical form of attention, has gained significant traction as a counter-practice to the West’s linkage of rational vision and social control. By linking women’s affective labor and ASMR’s experimentation with sound’s embodying qualities, this essay questions whether ASMR can function as one such ethical counter-practice.

ASMR in a post-2008 world

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) is a burgeoning YouTube subculture, which opens up new avenues for engaging with reparative media practices under late capitalism. “ASMR-tists,” as performers often call themselves, use binaural recording techniques, which mimic left ear right ear sound perception,[9] to elicit hyper-real tactile sounds from the everyday objects they manipulate on camera. ASMR consumers report different kinds of responses to the stimuli presented in ASMR, from tingles up and down their spines to deep relaxation and a sensation of deep embodied presence. Performers modulate their voices into a whisper to induce a relaxed state in the viewer. While many audiovisual media forms can be said to have some haptic content,[10] ASMR offers a unique form of expanded sentience in that for those who experience the



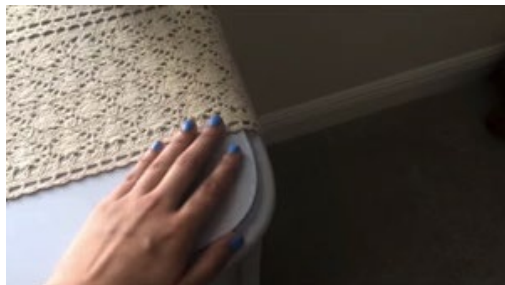
In a 2013 video Maria plays a receptionist and a physical therapist. The intertextual play between Maria's real life job as a receptionist at a doctor's office and her playing a receptionist in her video is common in ASMR videos.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hso5_Glnyx8&t=84s



As crowdfunding for ASMR with service with Patreon has expanded, some performers like TheWaterWhispers now formally list their donors' names at the beginning of videos.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2bUhNiD_RA&t=12s



tingles of ASMR, it is a medium that quite literally touches you back. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's famous notion of the aura and contemporary theories of media embodiment, this essay tracks how ASMR has been used by this burgeoning subculture as a reparative practice against what Teresa Brennan calls "bioderegulation," the somatic damage inflicted on the body by telecommunications' compression of temporal and geographic distances.[11] If the historical task of film, as Walter Benjamin claimed in the 1930s, was to train the sensorium under industrial capitalism, then I believe ASMR offers us such training under economic postmodernization, a regime characterized by the feminization of labor.[12] The women who perform the banal tasks of care labor in ASMR urgently recognize the need for the anxiety-ridden sensorium of late capitalism to be grounded in the substance of everyday life.

The earliest ASMR video archived on YouTube dates back to 2009,[13] indicating that ASMR as a media subculture gains force after the financial crisis of 2008, a period in which U.S. life came to be characterized by housing loss, debt, and mass layoffs.[14] Many critics point out that though markets recovered after 2009, the extreme precarity that the 2008 housing crash imposed on low- to middle-income workers continues to shape not only post-recession economic life but emotional life, resulting in declining health rates and a skyrocketing number of suicides in the United States.[15] A growing body of critical work on the emotional experience of late capitalism has begun to refer to the subject's life under this regime as one fundamentally marked by trauma.[16] Whereas classical definitions of trauma understand the phenomenon as an experience of social or physical injury so intense that it cannot be fully absorbed by consciousness, the traumatic experience of late capitalism can no longer be connected back to a single event.[17]

Instead, trauma in contemporary life is diffuse, yet omnipresent. Under postmodern regimes of labor, stress can be attributed as much to the lack of social safety net as to the mores of work itself where workers are expected to exert a combination of self-discipline and flexibility in the face of an ever shifting set of demands on time and bodily energy. These pressures have only intensified in the years following the economic crisis of 2008. Technology, too, has played a major role in shaping the trauma-inflected subjectivity of the modern worker. A host of popular medical literature links cell phone light to insomnia and excessive sitting in front of computers to musculoskeletal problems, to name just a few health issues caused by excessive dependence on technology. This stress is not merely a byproduct of interfacing with machines, but a physiological reaction to the spatiotemporal regimes that technology has enabled in which the global pace of production and consumption have far outstripped the body's ability to keep up, resulting in the exhausted, bioderegulated body.[18]

Recent interventions in affect theory have been attentive to the ways that neoliberalism wields therapeutic discourses to mold compliant subjects, and an older body of work on trauma theory analyzes how trauma shapes cognition and memory. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the somatic effects of neoliberal socioeconomic conditions on the senses. The total effect of the economic-technological trauma brought on by late capitalism is evident in a range of symptoms—from anxiety to insomnia to depression—which ultimately point to the ways that constant, low level trauma de-presences, or dissociates the subject. Dissociation constitutes the splitting off of body from mind, causing a fundamental disconnection between sensation and experience, between the tangible world and the body. If trauma rends a person's relation to the symbolic order, dissociation disrupts the body's sentient relation to the material world.

The problematic of the body's alienation from sensuous experience in modernity is not new. It can be traced back to the dawn of industrialization, and constitutes the heart of Benjamin's claim that human experience was on the wane. For



In a video titled “ASMR Whispered Tour of my Room,” ASMR Darling shows the viewer details of her teenage suburban bedroom in her parents’ house. For 19 year old aspiring actress ASMR Darling, the idea of moving out of her parents’ house doesn’t come up, as if not even on the horizon as an economic possibility. The emphasis of the video is on the absolutely banal details of her daily life, rather than exceptional ones. The framing is kinetic, casual, and off-hand. She places her hand on a dresser bedecked with a doily, holds up a mini aloe plant, and zeroes in on a teddy bear on the floor of her room. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10omMBSTvCg&t=874s>

Benjamin, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, *Ehrfahrung* (long experience) was giving way to *Erlebnis* (short shock episodes) that could not be narrativized or made sense of in the same way as preindustrial experience.[19] I contend that Benjamin’s argument for film as a training ground for the sensorium is implicitly an argument for haptic materiality as a potentially restorative property of media. The difference between the media landscape that Benjamin addressed in the 1930s and that of the contemporary moment is one of not just of degrees, but of leaps toward a paradigm in which critics propose that technology is complicit in the radical reshaping of human consciousness. The shock experience catalyzed by urbanization, trench warfare, and railroads in the early twentieth century is now promoted by far more abstract and isolating, but no less psychologically or physically violent technologies: Skype, gentrification (and its counterpart, commuting), and drone warfare.

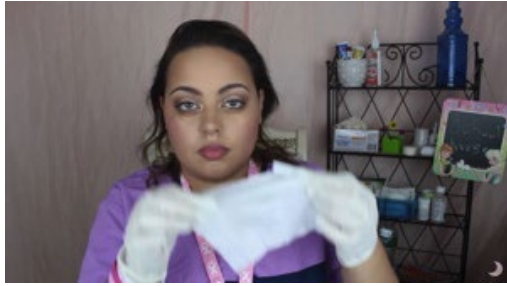
ASMR videos intervene in this fractured bodily schema of late capitalism. The practice’s emphasis on aural performativity and haptic materiality induces a feeling of deep presence in the viewer, a sensation that the few neurological studies performed on ASMR liken to meditation.[20] I contend that this sensation provides a form of sensory training that helps withstand the deregulated pace of contemporary life. ASMR practice’s insistence on the quotidian is part of its reparative effect, working on the dissociated body to reestablish the connection between physical sensation and experience. ASMR performers, predominantly economically precarious women, enact the unwaged labor of care on camera for each other and for their ever-growing audience. The main subject of this piece, MariaGentleWhispering, as of recently has been able to quit her job at a receptionist in a doctor’s office and draw an income from crowd-sourcing site Patreon, through which her fans fund her ASMR practice.[21] But Maria is really an exception. Most ASMR-tists work in relatively low-paying care work fields like massage therapy or as hair stylists or makeup artists. Some ASMR performers like AmalZD and ASMR Darling are young adult women who live in their parents’ homes.[22] It is common for ASMR-tists to reference their day jobs as makeup artists or body workers on camera.

While contemporary feminist discussions of affective labor tend to focus on the socially and economically coercive aspects of feminized labor in post-Fordist economies, I hope here to put an emphasis on the sometimes neglected positive side of affective labor, its capacity to produce community and collective subjectivities.[23] In this paper, I focus primarily on how affective labor generates use-value, rather than on the ways that it is used as a tool to extract surplus value through emotional and economic coercion. ASMR performers have created online communities whose goal is healing and care. That they have done so through mediatic contact with the viewer’s body is at once revelatory of new thresholds for media embodiment and of the condition of the body under late capitalism.

[Go to page 2](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Nurse role plays of various types are ubiquitous in ASMR. In the first still, PeaceandSaraeity plays a school nurse, while in the second, Isabellmgaination plays a World War II nurse.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_43Vn3JfVWk&t=481s
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvPU1LiOUJw&t=254s>



Chinese performer TingTing plays a receptionist at a Beijing hotel. TingTing's video's tend to play to a Chinese version of the exoticized immigrant trope common to ASMR.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mral2MGpzLw&t=921s>

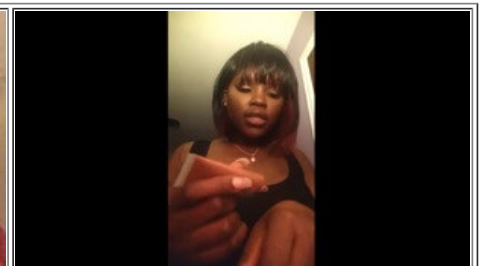
ASMR and the performing body

MariaGentleWhispering, whose videos I examine in this paper, is the unmitigated superstar of the ASMR world. A Russian immigrant living in the D.C. area, Maria has become the face of ASMR in the mainstream media due at least in part to the sheer popularity of her YouTube channel. The question of who ASMR videos are aimed at insistently reasserts itself in watching Maria's videos: Is the pageantry of femininity evident in these video *for* the male gaze? Is the purpose of these videos erotic? Maria and most ASMR-tists roundly deny that there is any erotic intent behind ASMR, and yet the specter of the au pair, sexy nurse, and mail order bride insistently linger around ASMR performance. Though there are a burgeoning number of African-American and Asian female ASMR-tists like Tahteebayy, Sung Mook, Lovely ASMR Dreams, Maria's own exoticized whiteness and her popularity has, to some degree, come to define popular and critical understandings of ASMR as the performance of sexualized care work by exoticized immigrant white women.

Throughout this essay, I attempt to acknowledge ASMR erotics while also moving beyond these questions. I believe that taking performers and consumers at their word that ASMR is not erotic in nature is an important part of understanding what is ultimately at stake in ASMR: mass mediated forms of social intimacy that play with femininity and gendered labor. My own analysis understands ASMR as erotic in so far as the videos' intent is the simulation of embodied social intimacy between viewer and performer, but I read this eroticism as decidedly non-genital. Additionally, I contend that ASMR erotics are *for* the female gaze, first as a sexualized homosocial address to other (mostly female) ASMR performers and second, as the generalized eroticized narcissistic self-representation of the social media age.[24] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



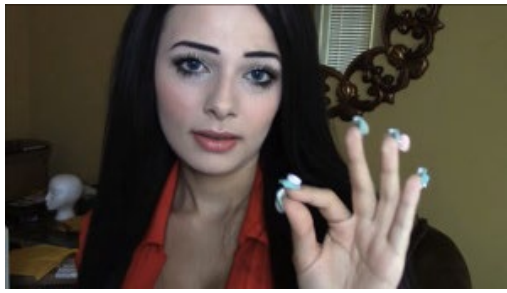
An increasing number of African-American women are performing ASMR. Here, SungMook, a performer who started uploading videos in 2015, does a role play where she gossips with and applies make up to her best friend.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26U5fThqNco&t=124s>



African-American performer TahteeBayy performs a gum-chewing role play. In addition to various typical personal attention role plays, food and gum chewing are a popular genre within the burgeoning black ASMR community.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwtiD1S0qVY&t=250s>

ASMR videos, in all their variety, can be characterized by two key interlocking traits

1. the performative establishment of intimacy between the ASMR-tist and the viewer through highly stylized vocal and gestural performance and
2. the incitement of sensory meridian response through sound and video



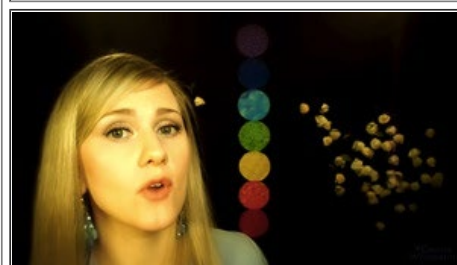
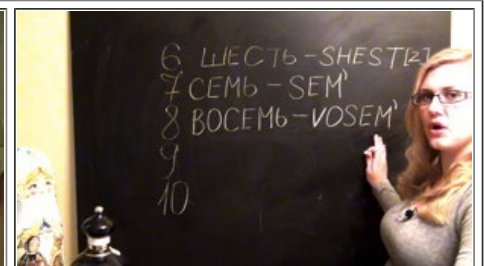
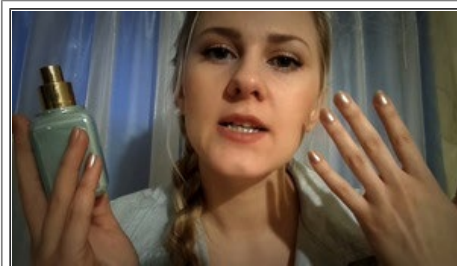
Here, AmalZD, a half-Palestinian half-American performer, plays a mall retailer of Israeli body products. Amal has done various role plays using an Arabic accent, playing up her foreignness. Of note here is the way that this performance is accompanied by an exaggerated gestural expressivity, which is even more emphasized by the small plastic objects attached to her long nails. In the same video, Amal taps on a bottle of moisturizer to elicit soft soothing noises from the plastic. This manipulation of the material properties of quotidian objects is central to ASMR.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EJjeUCr4cs&t=742s>

editing techniques that emphasize the tactile sound qualities of the performance.

ASMR performers' bodily repertoire serves to repeatedly de-emphasize the communicative contents of speech in favor of the materiality of the speaking voice. As phenomenologist Don Ihde asserts, sound "presences" what is otherwise invisible.[25] ASMR-tist's highly stylized vocal performances of breathy cadences and soft but deliberate audible breathing call attention to aspects of physical presence that are barely perceptible in face to face interaction. Further, the sonic aspect of embodied physical presence is often completely absent from dramatic audiovisual productions. Naturalistic film performance tends to foreground certain aspects of the actors' embodied presence like the speaking voice, while effacing other aspects like the sound of actors' breathing.

Maria's YouTube page has one hundred million views and houses hundreds of her videos. Maria works as a massage therapist, a career in which she was recently certified, acquiring the requisite training in spite of significant economic hardship (as documented in her vlogs). In her videos, she plays various roles including retail worker, spa technician, Russian language teacher, and New Age body workers of various kinds, to name but a few of the care labor roles she enacts. My wager is that Maria's videos are so successful not only because she most successfully performs the ambiguously eroticized form of care that ASMR performers trade in, but because of her ability to manipulate what Roland Barthes calls "the grain of the voice," by which he means the body's physicality embedded in the voice itself.[26]

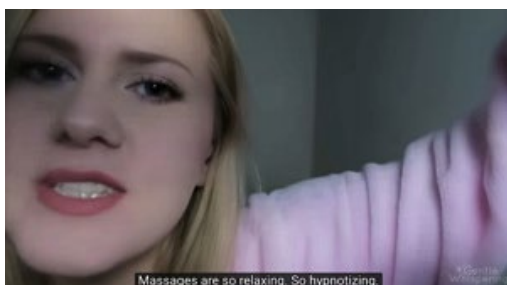


MariaGentleWhispering plays various care-work jobs: a spa technician, a Russian-language teacher, and a chakra healer, respectively.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru7XYG2gBa8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghPHcX3C0to&t=946s>

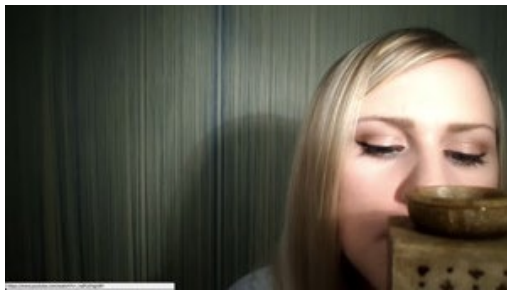
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jdrOe9FdZ8&t=646s>



For Barthes, the grain is the part of vocal expressivity unburdened by linguistic signification. As Maria's ASMR name suggests, a significant part of her vocal repertoire is the whisper. Compared to other vocal registers, whispers, emphasize sibilants—"s" sounds produced by bringing the tip of the tongue to the roof of the mouth. Whispers are differentiated from quiet talking in that they require a substantial constriction of the whole mouth, a reduction of vocal mobility that simultaneously forces more breath from the body. The repeated hissing of sibilants and surplus breath emitted by whispering call attention not to the words Maria is speaking, but to her embodied physical presence in the mise-en-scène.

In the video “eye-gazing,” the slight clenching of Maria’s jaw helps her achieve the breathy cadence that she’s so famous for.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_haPLEHgh8Y&t=645s



Maria, like many ASMR performers, treats the front of the camera as the viewer’s face. Here, she blows into the left side of the camera, and then the right.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_haPLEHgh8Y&t=645s

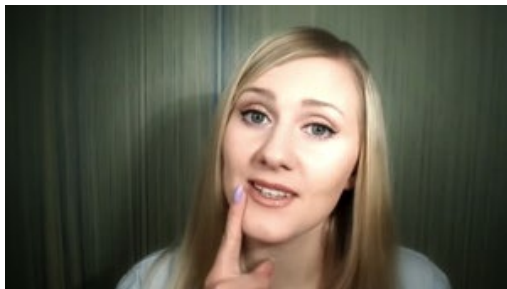
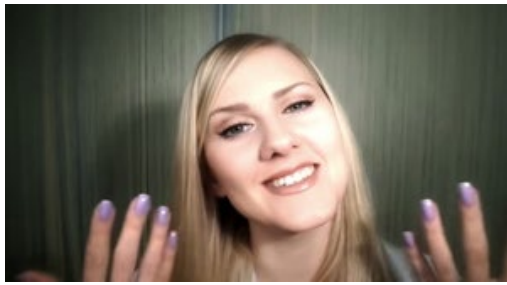
When Barthes discusses his preference for imperfect, raspy opera singers over virtuosic, technically perfect ones, he goes back to the Greek definition of breath. He writes, “The breath is the *pneuma*, the soul swelling or breaking,”[27] which suggests that the sound of breath not only materializes the workings of the body, but the more ineffable aspects of physical presence.

Maria is one a few successful ASMR-tists whose second language is English; others include a Dutch woman called TheWaterWhisperer and a Czech woman who calls herself Olivia Kissper. Maria’s fans often comment that they enjoy Maria’s nonstandard English diction. In a twenty-two minute video entitled, “Eye gazing, ear-to-ear blowing, head massagers,”[28] Maria gazes into your eyes; she blows into the left side of the frame with her mouth just out of frame and then into the right side of the frame, and finally massages and brushes her hair with various head massaging tools. With headphones on, the binaural recording emphasizes the sense that Maria blowing on each of the viewer’s ears. The basic set up for this video is a camera mounted on top of a binaural recorder.[29] When Maria’s face is framed in extreme close-up, the camera-recorder set up, mimics the spatial and sensorial experience of intimate face-to-face contact. Maria’s face, in its slight movement in and out of frame simulates movement around the viewer’s head. The left-ear, right-ear sound separation achieved through stereo recording is more obvious and intense with headphones on, creating an immersive sonic experience.

In this video, as in many others, Maria employs the breathy and careful vocal cadence described above (which is strikingly different than the regular speaking voice she uses in her occasional vlogs). Whereas in standard American English, inflections tend to come at the ends of sentences, Maria often inflects her sentences in the middle. In this particular video, Maria instructs the viewer to pay attention to the physiognomy of people’s faces in order to read their intentions, running her fingers over different parts of her face to demonstrate what different features signify, concluding at 9:13 by saying, “So / you can tell a lot by a per- / son’s face?” Her pauses in the middle of words for breath are fairly typical of her vocal styling. These nonstandard pauses and inflections further defamiliarize the content of her speech. Language in ASMR becomes a sonic material to be manipulated, rather than a medium for the delivery of information.

The gestural expressivity in Maria’s performance is crucial to eliciting the sensory meridian response. I argue that this form of embodied speech and signification through bodily gestures revives certain aspects of oral storytelling in which the body of the speaker is chiefly considered a vehicle for the transmission of affects rather than for the communicative aspects of language. Early twentieth century French anthropologist Marcel Jousse saw rhythmic gesture as constitutive of the oral style of speech, positing that mimetic gestures function to reactivate memory without recourse to thought, drawing attention to how the body’s entire movement enables cognition.[30] Jousse understood gesture as a tool, on par with any other physical tool in shaping human culture. Maria’s gestures and vocal technique activate the oral style of cognition that Jousse describes, in which movement is as central to expression as linguistic communication. Marshall McLuhan famously characterized the difference between oral and print culture as residing in the fact that oral culture maintained the interplay between all five senses, while print culture remained anchored to the abstracted and transcendental faculty of vision.[31]

For McLuhan, oral cultures, more reliant on the ear, were able to trigger all the senses through hearing; the eye is comparatively neutral, able to stay segregated from the rest of the senses.[32] Though ASMR is a video-based subculture, Maria’s physical and gestural performance achieves the interplay between the senses that McLuhan identified as central to oral cultures by using the auditory



When Maria explains “personology,” she touches different parts of her face, explaining what personality traits the different shapes indicate. Everything in the role play is designed to demonstrate maximal gestural expressivity. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_haPLEHgh8Y&t=645s

dimension to trigger sensation all over the body. ASMR technologically augments the oral style of bodily performance to incite physical sensations on the surface of the body. Part of ASMR’s striking oddness is the fact that this relation between sound and touch is unusual in the contemporary West, our habits of attention having been linearized not only by print culture, but by the predominance of ocularity. Maria’s ASMR performance bears out McLuhan’s assertion that digital media culture constitutes not a return to orality but an amplified and augmented orality in which acoustics once again gain primacy as a vehicle for acting on the other four senses.

In the video “Eye gazing, ear- to ear- blowing, head massagers,” Maria both performs and thematizes the facial and bodily expressivity that Jousse diagnoses as constitutive of oral cultures. Maria opens the video by saying,

“I would like to start this video by establishing a nonjudgmental, loving, and compassionate contact with you and this can be done by eye gazing... This lil’ exercise can help you see the beauty of the human face—their mimics, their expressions, the way they carry themselves, the way their face shaped. It can tell you different things about a person...”

Maria proceeds to provide a typology of the different meanings of certain physiognomic aspects of the face, including the shape of eyebrows, the forehead, and the roundness of cheeks, while alternating between touching her face and rhythmically gesticulating with her hands fanned out. Maria’s lesson in the video draws on a variety of folk wisdom as well as a New Age pseudoscience termed, “personology,” which purports to map personality through the face. Though I tend to treat the content of her speech here as somewhat arbitrary, it is very much worth noting here that the pedagogical framing of the video is one of Maria’s most prominent rhetorical modes. Maria is one of a few ASMR performers who explicitly refer to themselves as healers, thus the didacticism of her performance bears some weight on my analysis here. Maria takes on the role of the traditional role of the storyteller-pedagogue, whose job it is to transmit information in the form of experience.

In this particular video, Maria touches her face and gesticulates in undulating waves. But it is Maria’s gesticulations, rather than the content of her speech, which function to make intersubjective contact with the viewer. Maria’s rhythmic performance here reflects Jousse’s analysis of how under the oral style, cognition is tightly nested into gesture and mimicry serves as mnemonic. Maria’s gestures mimic the types of movement required to make a baby fall asleep or the basic rocking back and forth motion that soothes the parasympathetic nervous system. Thus the viewer is drawn into empathic identification with Maria not just through her entreaty to relax but through her mimetic gestures which recall the affective labor of comforting a person. The orality of ASMR encourages an active embodied engagement with the sonic and visual materiality of the video on the part of the viewer, a type of engagement less prominent in more standard sound-image montage.

ASMR-tists like Maria whisper, coo, and purr into the camera, their voices materializing not just the sonic presence of the body, but their cultural position as bodies marked feminine. The ASMR whisper, de-emphasizing communication

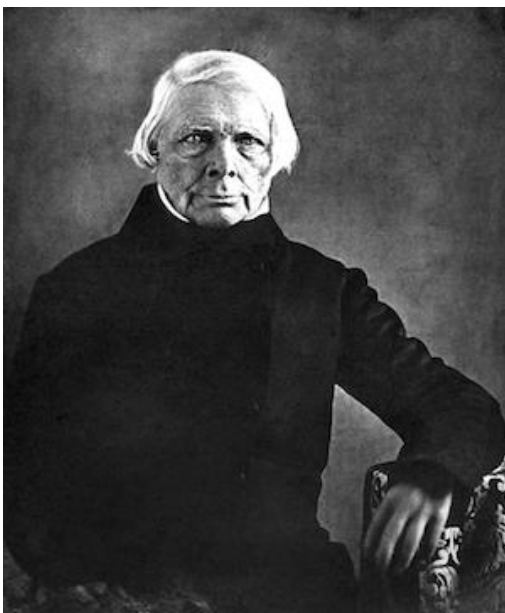
and foregrounding the material traces of the feminine body, cuts against liberal assumptions within second wave feminist discourses in which “having a voice” serves as a metaphor for gaining political agency.[35] Pooja Ranjan’s writing on voicelessness and vocal materiality in documentary traces how in Western philosophy, the articulation of reason through speech constitutes the free, agential subject.[34] By this prevailing cultural logic, the voice whose materiality supersedes its rational communicative function is a non-sovereign voice. Frances Dyson historicizes this logic in her study of U.S. radio, pointing out that the dominant voices of radio, Euro-American and male, are constructed as neutral, authoritative, and essentially disembodied. By contrast, voices containing traces of age, illness, ethnicity, race, or aberrant gender are considered too embodied for radio.[35]

In light of the historical-cultural authority granted to the sovereign communicative voice, ASMR’s breathy whispers seem to insistently contest gendered notions of competence. The ASMR whisper mobilizes “techniques of femininity” toward the aim of reparation and care, treating feminized labor as agential and important to the perpetuation of daily life. Sandra Bartky identifies these techniques as a complex set of bodily comportment and practices that exert disciplinary force on women, a repertoire which includes the treatment of the body as an aesthetic surface and a culturally circumscribed set of gestures and movements that comprise feminine behavior.[36] I would like to differentiate my own definition of techniques of femininity as more aligned with Marcel Mauss’s concept of bodily techniques, in which bodily behavior is not just shaped by culture, but itself shapes culture.[37] Mauss’s analysis of the cultural transmission of bodily techniques brings to light the ways that movement transmits cultural experience. I believe this shift in emphasis enables us to examine femininity and its association with affective labor, not as a kind of self-imposed disciplinary project for women to suffer but as a set of techniques which themselves help to constitute the social in ways that are both disciplinary and generative of community.

Aura: the tactile sound and the haptic image

Online ASMR practices extend what Barthes describes as the “grain” of the voice much further than the body itself, but more importantly, much further than is standard in audiovisual recording. The techniques used to spur increased embodiment in ASMR are twofold: 1) sound tactility achieved through binaural recording and 2) the haptic visibility native to the video medium, as well as its aesthetics. I use sound tactility here to indicate the ways that sound recording can ‘presence’ (to use Idhe’s term) an object to the point of highlighting the object’s tactile dimensions. I use the term ‘haptic visibility’ to describe audiovisual media’s affective and virtual qualities, the way an image can produce a sense of being touched through textual qualities in the image or certain forms of sound-image montage. While the embodied performance of sound is crucial to ASMR, the production of sound tactility and image haptics through video and sound recording are essential in creating what I term the ‘auratic encounter’ at the heart of ASMR.

In this auratic encounter, the viewer is confronted with the ghostly, affective, and yet decidedly material force of the performer’s body *through* sound. The ASMR-tist’s ability to presence herself for the viewer restores the viewer, at least the one susceptible to ASMR, to her own bodily presence. Walter Benjamin’s notion of the aura is widely understood as an art historical concept, the unique presence of the artwork in space and time, a uniqueness which is liquidated by mechanical reproduction and modernity’s destruction of the art work’s ritual context.[38] However, Benjamin’s concept of the aura was never quite stable, as Benjamin recursively defined and redefined the term throughout the 1930s.



In this daguerrotype portrait of Friedrich Schelling, the gray around the figure of the

philosopher is slightly lighter than from the rest of the background due to the fact that early photography demanded long exposures and longer sitting time from the subject. For Benjamin, this subtle halo was an index of early photography's capacity to capture time, a quality effaced as the medium became capable of capturing images instantaneously.

<http://images.fineartamerica.com/images-medium-large-5/2-friedrich-wj-von-schelling-granger.jpg>



For Benjamin, the experience of movie viewing provided a context for collective affective engagement with images on screen and fellow audience members.

<https://medium.com/panel-frame/double-screening-texting-and-socialization-in-theaters-b5fcee3986a1>

In my analysis of ASMR, I highlight two of aura's lesser discussed paradoxical valences. The first, from Benjamin's early theorization of the term describes aura as the way that daguerrotyping, with its demand for quiet durational sitting from the portrait subject and high light sensitivity, produced a blurry halo around the sitter, imprinting a visceral sense of the sitter's temporally-bounded presence on the viewer of these pictures.[39] Thus, in Benjamin's first iteration of aura, early photography is a medium in which human experience still retains a sense of lived time.

The second instance of aura I use from Benjamin's 1939 essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," describes the aura much more explicitly as an eroding index of lived human experience, an experience of temporality being fundamentally altered by urbanization and technology.[40] The dissipation of the aura is pegged to the waning of human's ability to narrativize their lived experience. For Benjamin, only early photographs were capable of meeting our gaze, an inter-subjective ghostly encounter between photographic subject and viewer.[41] I choose these two pre- and post- Art Work theorizations of aura because they emphasize the ways that embodied physical presence and its ghostly materiality are central to Benjamin's notion of aura.

While the second definition would seem to dictate that with the liquidation of the aura inevitably comes the total dissolution of experience, the paradox at the heart of Benjamin's writings on modernity is that the liquidation of the aura sets the stage for another kind of experience. This new jagged, dissociative experience (*Erlebnis*) is one defined by shock and mediated by technology, namely the technology of film. For Benjamin, the cinema's capacity to act on the human body included its haptic materiality; its immersive capacities; and its potential to foster collective experiences of empathic identification both with human and animal figures on screen, as well as with other spectators in the theater. These qualities all constituted Benjamin's schema for how the cinema could serve as sensory training. Thus tactility (and implicitly, materiality) appears in Benjamin as not just a reparative property, but as a precondition to the reconfiguration of experience in modernity.[42] I posit that tactility emerges as a privileged mode of sensory reception in Benjamin because touch confronts the subject with a material sense of the world which trauma erases through dissociation. Touch also constitutes a mode of being in the world in which the body is as much of a tool as technology itself. We can observe the two valences of aura functioning in ASMR: first, the spectator's feeling of literally being touched by the performer's sonic materiality and second, the restoration of the very possibility of experience through the sensation of deep presence that ASMR promotes in the viewer.

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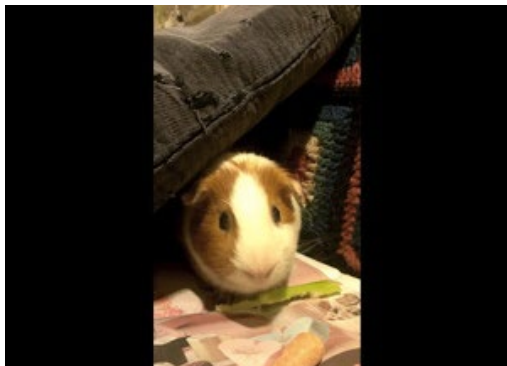
JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In ASMR, videos that enumerate and perform long lists of triggers have themselves become a genre. Here, Heather Feather manipulates latex gloves and kinetic sand.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GwtmUneclI&t=4817s>



Videos of animals eating are a small sub-genre of ASMR videos. These usually figure domestic animals like cats, dogs, or guinea pigs. Here, a guinea pig eats celery. The ASMR effect here comes from the crunch of the celery.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sli3Z26OdA>

As mentioned earlier, not everyone is susceptible to ASMR videos and individuals' specific triggers vary widely. In a 2015 video, ASMR-tist HeatherFeather details one hundred and twenty different discrete triggers—from more common one like scratching and tapping and whispering to the sound of latex gloves rubbing together and kinetic sand crunching. For some ASMR consumers, a sound-image conjunction is necessary in order to experience the tingles and deep presence of ASMR, where for others, the sound without an image track is enough to trigger the sensation. ASMR presents a vast field of unpredictable forms of new audio-visual experimentation, many with no particular interest in narrative role play nor representations of the human social world. New such genres include: videos of people eating specific types of foods with mainly their hands and face framed by the camera, girls' hands' manipulating slime, and animals making soft noises. This article focuses merely on the most popular ASMR-tist and her role play videos because they exemplify a tight integration between sound, image, and practices of affective labor. Maria's videos tend to figure the source of the sound in the diegesis, working the objects and their accompanying sounds into the role play, which naturalizes the strangeness of ASMR by framing it within the performance of affective labor.

ASMR's insistence on the maximum materialization of the image-sound relation create an auratic contact between performer and viewer which encourages what Laura Marks terms "a tactile epistemology" in which "knowledge is gained not on the model of vision but through physical contact."^[43] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] In her analysis of video-based intercultural cinema, Marks designates a continuum of representation in which one pole is mimetic (tactility is a part of mimetic representation) and on the other pole is abstract, symbolic representation. Marks' tactile epistemology proposes that there are whole spheres of sentient engagement with the material world that have been repressed in favor of symbolic representation.^[44] While Marks proposes tactile epistemologies as a form of alternative ethics in reading film, I contend that tactile epistemologies can serve an even more radical function: to repair the damage inflicted on the sensorium by constant stress through impressing a feeling of deep embodied presence on the viewer.



Performer TheChew, whose channel is almost exclusively food videos, eats pickles. When wearing headphones, the listener experiences the crunching of the pickles as thunderously loud and sharp. The Chew does not speak for most of the video and maintains a very serious expression.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUUAu_aiaVw&t=267s



Performer Slime Halo manipulates "crunchy slime," which contains foam in it that gives the substance a more pliant than liquid character. This video, as most slime video, does not include any talking, just the performer's hands playing with the slime.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHQkMiwqwxU>



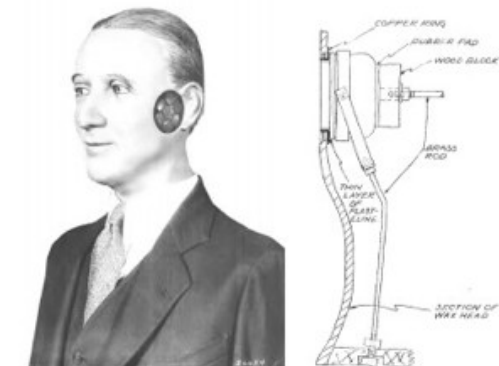
In "eye gazing," Maria's shirt and hair are mic'd so that her every movement elicits sound.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_haPLEHgh8Y&t=645s

ASMR's ability to effect a reparative sense of subjective presence in the viewer is rooted in the way that the practice uses the recording medium to impress upon the viewer the embodied presence of the performer. Another example from Maria's "eye gazing" video further elucidates how auratic sound functions in ASMR. Maria runs a rake-like massager through her long hair. We can hear the strands being moved back and forth because her hair itself is mic'd with hypersensitive binaural recording devices. At the very end of the video, Maria remarks, "I hope you enjoyed my crinkly shirt," a comment which reminds us that all of Maria's physical movements are designed to elicit sounds that both emphasize her physical presence in space and envelop the viewer. This latter effect is achieved through the viewer wearing headphones. The crinkling of Maria's shirt exaggerates the sounds of her movements, eliciting a tactile sound. This sonic tactility constitutes the auratic imprint of Maria's body in space. It is Maria's human trace imprinted in sound that transmits the deep feeling of presence that ASMR fans often report experiencing. I contend that the sonic trace in ASMR is analogous to Benjamin's linkage of the breathy aura around the portrait sitter in early daguerrotypes. Benjamin writes,

"These pictures were made in rooms where every client was confronted, in the person of the photographer, with a technician of the latest school: whereas the photographer was confronted, in the person of every client, with a member of a rising class equipped with an aura that had seeped into the very folds of the man's frock coat or floppy cravat." [45]

Here, the aura is the invisible, but still palpable trace of the portrait sitter's bodily presence whose movements are inscribed in the temporal duration of the photograph. For Benjamin, the bourgeoisie that witnessed the first developments of commercial photography were endowed with this aura because they inhabited a transitional period in which industrialization had not yet come to completely dominate daily life. This passage illuminates aura as consciousness' still-temporal trace, a trace which evidences lived experience on the threshold of technological transformation. If we are to understand aura as a category still useful in diagnosing the relation between experience, the body, and the technical apparatus in postmodernity, ASMR's sound auratics are not just the imprint of the performer's body, they are the imprint of a certain lived experience, marked in turn by the postmodernization of labor. Though Benjamin first proposed aura as a visual category, I expand the term to include sound. This expansion reveals the transmedial applicability of the term, but more importantly, it reveals how aura designates the abiding presence of the human body in mediation, which manifests as both visible trace and invisible affective force.

ASMR's extension and amplification of the recorded sound-image relation is premised on a simple and relatively old technology: binaural recording, which mimics left-ear, right-ear sound reception. Though ASMR recording techniques have become increasingly sophisticated, ASMR relies on basic sound and video editing to achieve its tingling effect. Most ASMR videos request that the viewer wear headphones in order to experience the binaural left-right sound division more acutely. ASMR directly equates the viewer's ears with the binaural recorder and the viewer's face with the camera lens. In a later part of the video "eye gazing," Maria handles a marble incense burner, tapping on it, and blowing smoke from the burner into each side of the recorder to simulate blowing the vapor into the viewer's ears. She then blows into the lens, saying, "and your face." Her movements around the frame are meant to simulate her movement around the viewer's head.



AT&T's "Oscar" binaural recording dummy debuted at the 1933 World's Fair. The inputs on

Binaural recording was first developed by AT&T and was displayed as an attraction at the 1933 World's Fair. [46] When the technology debuted at the Fair,

each side of Oscar's head were meant to enable sound to travel through the recording devices as sound travels through the ear.

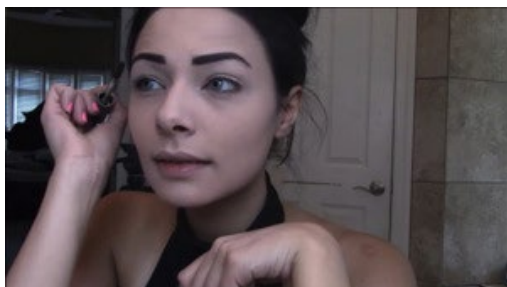
http://www.lesonbinaural.fr/EDIT/DOCS/stephan_paul_binaural.PDF



With the advent of ASMR and advances in virtual reality technology, binaural recorders such as the 3Dio Free Space are becoming more popular. In these contemporary binaural devices, you can really see the uncanny imbrication of the prosthetic human body and machine aesthetics. <http://heatherfeatherasmr.blogspot.com/2013/08/my-new-equipment-free-space-pro.html>



The first intentional ASMR video on YouTube has no image track, highlighting the degree to which ASMR visuality is weak and primarily a supplement to the practice's sonic dimensions. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHtgPbfTgKc&t=1s>



it was exhibited as “Oscar,” a mechanical man with microphones for ears sitting in a glass box. Fair goers sat around the box wearing headphones, listening to what Oscar heard: flies buzzing, crowds in the distance. The audience was astonished to hear themselves surrounded by the noises that Oscar heard.[47] Receivers were placed into Oscar the manikin’s head in the place where his ears would be in order to more closely mimic human sound perception. AT&T would continue to produce more advanced models of these manikins until the receiver was shaped more and more like the human ear. Thus we see in the early origins of binaural technology a strong will to draw out the uncanny relation between body and apparatus, a will to imbricate machine and body. The difference in usage between the original Oscar device and contemporary ASMR headphone usage reflects a significant cultural shift. While early binaural recording was first displayed as mass culture spectacle premised on collective reception characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the use of headphones in ASMR reveals the private, isolated nature of ASMR consumption.

ASMR reverses the sound-as-supplement-to-image relation often found in narrative cinema. In ASMR, the fuzzy digital image is subordinate to the rich sonic textures of the soundtrack. In fact, the first semiformal ASMR “video” on YouTube was created by YouTube user “WhisperLife” and features a woman with a British accent cooing over a black screen. ASMR videos tend to possess the murky, desaturated cast of the video format, even when shot in high definition. What is highlighted in ASMR visuality is texture and light on surfaces rather than the crispness of the image even when the image itself is of reasonably high quality. This is partially because most objects and people featured in ASMR are shot in extreme close-up. Every aspect of ASMR shooting and framing is designed to increase the sense of intimate contact with the performer. While early ASMR videos used cell phone cameras to record and iMovie to edit their videos, as of the last two years, ASMR has gotten much more equipment driven and technologically savvy, and as this tendency has grown, audio recording companies have started catering to the ASMR market.[48] Maria has gone so far as to construct a sound-proof booth to minimize outside noise. Additionally, some practitioners have even made instructional tutorials narrating how to use Audacity to create clean, yet “three-dimensional” sound.[49] The emphasis on □□ three-dimensional sound and static zoomed-in framing combine to impress upon the viewer an exaggerated sensual intimacy with the performer’s face.

ASMR erotics are two-fold: constituted by the vaguely sexualized and often cartoonishly feminine self-presentation of the performers, as well as by video’s medium-specific capacity to create textural pixelated images and a sense of embodied intimacy with the figures on screen. Female ASMR-tists by and large are conventionally attractive women who spectacularize their femininity in the video’s diegesis, while at the same time thematizing the process of feminine self-construction through the featured role plays. It is standard for ASMR-tists, for example, to wear heavy, almost stagey makeup in videos, or to include their cleavage within the video’s frame. However, my own analysis is interested in the way that performers highlight the constructed-ness of their appearance through hair, cosmetics, and dress, drawing on this process as a source of intimacy between women. It is no coincidence that makeup artist sessions are one of the most popular genres of ASMR role play. In some sense, ASMR practices enact a kind of affective labor for other women that would usually be performed by women for men in industries like phone sex. In one video, entitled “ASMR HOW I DO MY MAKEUP TO LOOK LESS LIKE DEATH (Softly Spoken),” AmalZD says, “People are like ‘you look so different without makeup’ and I’m like ‘that’s kind of the point isn’t it?”[50] Amal’s comment, delivered in a strange cross between deadpan and soft ditz, drives home the degree to which ASMR’s stagey femininity is often treated as a process of continuous self-configuration performed for other

In extreme close-up, you notice the flamboyance and purposefully denaturalized look of AmalZD's appearance.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUvYNbeISS0&t=1505s>

women, a performance which bears both distinctly erotic and maternal valences for its female viewers.

For the straight male viewers who consume these videos, there is an undeniable thrill to the simulated proximity to an attractive woman created by ASMR practice, as evidenced in stray untoward comments littered in ASMR-tists' comment streams. However, I argue that to reduce ASMR's erotics to a scopophilic dyad of male viewer as voyeur and female performer as exhibitionist flattens the complex web of desires that may exist between ASMR-tists and their mixed gender audience.[51] To assume that ASMR-tists address themselves only or mostly to men because these women generally adhere to normative codes of femininity also flattens the complexity of the scopophilic drive. Gerturde Koch reminds us that the scopophilic drive can include non-mimetic qualities, for example, a child's identification with objects in the world and these objects' material characteristics.[52] I would argue that Koch's expansion of the category of scopophilia gets at the heart of what is so powerful about ASMR—the practice confronts us intimately with the world's materiality, objects' sound materiality, and the very pleasure of examining every crevice and curve of the performer's eye.

Laura Marks identifies a visual erotics at work in the video image due to video's relative lack of quality (compared to 35mm film) and to the relay of visual information from source to screen, which encourages the viewer to develop a more tactile relation with the image.[53] In the video "eye gazing," we can observe the incitement to a kind of erotic tactility that Marks outlines above. Maria stands against an aquamarine curtain framed in close-up, lit by an overhead key light. The light catching certain strands of Maria's long straight blonde hair echo the vertical weave of the aqua textiles behind her. Soft pastel tones dominate the mise-en-scène. All of these subtle details create a haptic relation to the ASMR image in which the viewer is immersed in the rich, but fuzzy sensory detail of the video surface. Indeed, ASMR embodiment goes beyond its haptic aesthetics and can ultimately be linked to the medium-specificity of the digital image itself. Mark Hansen proposes that the ontological basis for the digital image is fundamentally different than that of the indexical photographic image, that perception of the digital image involves a more embodied and affectively intense process of construction than does the indexical photographic image.[54] Hansen's phenomenological schema of the digital image helps us to understand why the affective transfer of ASMR is so strong. The very medium specificity of video lends itself to these intensities by encouraging an active, bodily engagement with the image of the performer.

Throughout this paper I address ASMR as a mediatic phenomenon, but ASMR advocates identify sensory meridian response as pre-digital: the halo-like sensation of tingles from real life personal attention, the act of getting a haircut, the feeling of someone gently touching your face. Because not everyone is susceptible to ASMR, it is widely debated whether the sensations associated with the practice are in fact discrete neurological phenomenon or whether they are the result of psychosomatic suggestion.[55] My own approach to analyzing ASMR resists this desire to bestow epistemic certainty on ASMR through scientific knowledge. As Marc Perelman's compelling study of audiophilia demonstrates, 'Golden eared' audiophiles have traditionally claimed their personal *experience* of listening to music as central to the creation of their subjectivity as music lovers and audio experts beyond the objective claims of sonic quality produced by audio engineering.[56] Likewise, I contend that ASMR should be understood as a 'golden eared' listening community in which subjectivity, personal experience, and immersive habits of attention and listening shape ASMR production and consumption, whether the tingles that the practice produces are empirically generalizable or not.

What is fascinating about ASMR as a mediatic phenomenon is the way that the affective transfer between performer and viewer is not dampened by the fact that it takes place over the video medium, but is actually heightened due to the screen's proximity to the viewer and the use of headphones. I would even argue that the affective charge of the ASMR performer's physical presence is heightened because of how the sound recording and the video format emphasize embodied intimacy. ASMR, like certain monetized and mediatized care jobs before it—psychic hotlines, cam girl porn, and phone sex—democratizes forms of care that are not only considered to be intimate, but grounded in the unique physical presence of the caregiver. As we will see in the following two sections, ASMR's offer of instant care, of embodied physical presence, can serve as a powerful repudiation of the norms of work when it circulates in a women's gift economy. However, as the practice of ASMR increasingly enters a broader capitalist market, the threat of another low-wage occupation for women bolstered by a few wage-earning superstars looms large. Further, ASMR's unique capacity to physicalize for the viewer the sound-image relation is a highly exploitable characteristic.

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Affective labor and ASMR

The rise of ASMR as a media form in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis signals the increasing omnipresence of affect as a double-edged tool in the contemporary U.S. post-Fordist economy. Affect is at once central to the constitution of community *and* to fueling consumer desire. This double-edged quality also permeates the term affective labor, which designates aspects of work like emotion and social performance that are not quantifiable within orthodox Marxist value theory.[57] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Feminist sociologist Arlie Hochschild's early study on emotional performance at work noted how flight attendants being constantly reminded to smile by their employers constituted a primary example of how the expectation of positive emotional performance was becoming as much a part of work as labor itself.[58] However, the demand for affect in the contemporary workforce is not limited to the requirement of positive social performance. Successful capitalist enterprises *produce* affects in the form of ideas and information.[59] ASMR, at its earliest stages as a media subculture, lies at the complex juncture of affect as the production of value, devalued women's work, and online community building. ASMR distills the affects common to activities like unwaged housework and waged care labor: presence, attention, and care. The women who perform ASMR, precarious economic subjects in their own right, have created what I will argue is a gift economy (for a broad audience and for each other) that valorizes traditionally devalued women's labor.

Tracking the circulation of the term affective labor in feminist debates provides some background for understanding the traditional economic devaluation of women's labor. Examining these debates also throws into high relief how ASMR challenges the culturally dominant narrative that women's care labor is disposable. I want to focus here on iterations of the debate that seek to reinvest women's care labor with cultural and economic value, arguing for affective labor as a potential site of political resistance, as well as a site for the production of subjectivity. Early autonomist feminist critiques of affective labor (otherwise called kin or care labor), which underpin contemporary debates about the term, posit that women's labor has traditionally been excluded from Marxist economic analysis.[60] This exclusion springs from the fact that orthodox Marxist political economy has tended only to examine formal waged labor performed by men outside the home as the object of its analysis, rendering women's labor inside the home invisible.[61] In 1975, Mariarosa Dallacosta and Selma James argued that political struggle needed to be reconfigured to understand the working-class housewife's role as an agent of reproductive labor—work performed within the home such as child care and cooking.[62] In its very early stages as a subculture, roughly 2009 to 2015, ASMR could be said to constitute a kind of housework of the Internet. ASMR performance is unwaged digital women's work that is fundamentally reproductive in nature, providing the care that the exhausted bodies of late capitalism need in order to function.

Contemporary debates about affective labor primarily refer to the postindustrial service economies in which what is demanded from workers is not limited to the production of commodities, but also of affects. With the expansion of the service economy, there has also been a concurrent rise in flows of migrant women crossing borders to work in personal care jobs like nail salons, elder care, and childcare.[63] While most contemporary interlocutors of affective labor

understand this demand for affects to be highly taxing on the worker, critics like Kathi Weeks question whether the worker can any longer be said to have recourse to a private sphere outside of capital in which an authentic, non-alienated self is possible.[64] I find this latter insight particularly prescient for understanding ASMR as a subculture that takes the emotional performance of contemporary feminine labor as its text. Weeks' diagnosis of the ways that subjectivity is altered by the lack of distinction between work and leisure gives us some clue as to why ASMR would be an appealing practice to someone who already works an emotionally demanding job in the service industry. The mimetic performance of work in ASMR provides a venue to reimagine work. As Weeks asks,

“Could this notion... of work be fleshed out in a way that points in the direction of a liberatory project, one that strives towards relations of equality and autonomy rather than hierarchy and command?”[65]

The horizontal non-authorial networked structure of ASMR subculture, in which feminized labor is valued and the work's reparative function is acknowledged, we can see the formation of such potential structures. Further, ASMR's use of the body and the sensorium as the privileged site for its reparative project brings to the foreground the way that affective labor and biopolitics—the production and management of life—are inextricably bound up.[66] ASMR practices highlight the fact that without care, there can be no community, no world.

Sustained attention to the sociality evident in the comment streams of ASMR videos and the citational practices of ASMR-tists reveal that the women who perform ASMR are performing, in part, for other ASMR-tists. An air of platonic romanticism permeates the comments that performers leave for each other in videos and in comment streams, though these comments have become less visible as ASMR audiences have expanded and viewers leave hundreds of comments on a single video. This creates a gift economy in which videos serve as social currency. The gift nature of ASMR videos can be seen not just in the way that performers disseminate their videos on YouTube for free, but in how the ASMR community conceptualizes intellectual property rights. There is no ASMR technique or role play that is considered original or belonging exclusively to one performer. Techniques and video conceits circulate freely amongst a network of performers. ASMR-tists increasingly take donations to fund the purchase of recording equipment and software, but this too, continues to function on the gift exchange model, all capital going to improving performer equipment rather than to monetary surplus for the performer. The pattern of monetization whereby only the most popular performers asked for donations to improve equipment has significantly shifted as the specter of making a living off ASMR becomes a reality for about three performers. It has become common practice for ASMR-tists, even fledgling ones, to crowd fund, so the practice's increasing monetization will likely continue to expand. As this process occurs, ASMR will resemble a subcultural gift economy less and less.



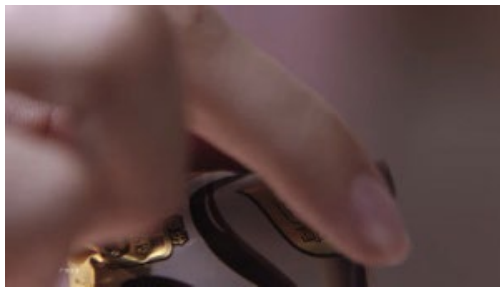
In her 2015 album, on a track called, “It’s Lonely at the Top,” Holly Herndon uses ASMR tapping, brushing, and rustling noises, along with a slightly ironically delivered role play voice that repeatedly asserts “I don’t know what we’d do without you” that juxtaposes the intense solicitousness of ASMR with the fierce competitiveness of contemporary culture.

The early ASMR video economy most closely resembled online fan fiction communities before these fan subcultures themselves opened up new profitable markets. Fan subcultures, heavily populated by women, create and exchange free content like stories, memes, and gifs, with the aim of generating social solidarity. [67] Critical studies of fan economies rely heavily on Maussian accounts of gift exchange to describe how these alternative economies create value outside of a commodity market.[68] Mauss distinguished gift exchange from commodity exchange in that a gift is not property, and therefore retains a fundamental connection to the giver. The act of exchange creates binding ties of social obligation between giver and receiver. By contrast, economic exchange entails an alienated relation to objects in which property rights sever the social obligations that precapitalist gift exchange creates. Analyses of fan culture, particularly women’s fan cultures follow this basic model. Similarly, ASMR networks are

<http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/20457-holly-herndon-platform/>



The Oculus Rift touts more immersive engagement than any previous commercial head mounted vr display set. The "Touch" mini joystick controllers translate minute finger movements into realistic virtual gestures. <https://virtualrealitytimes.com/2017/07/18/full-list-of-best-vr-games-for-the-oculus-rift/>



This Dove chocolate ad for Chinese markets is the first to explicitly borrow techniques from ASMR videos. Not only is each movement mic'd and mixed quite loudly to emphasize the binaural crinkling of the wrapper and the waxy breaking apart sound of the chocolate tab, but the

bound through this process of reciprocal exchange. This gift dynamic's saliency for ASMR relies on the practice's circulation amongst a relatively small group of practitioners and fans. Sci-fi and women's fan cultures have also tended to open up new markets for capitalist consumption as they increase in popularity.

The workings of the ASMR gift economy reveal how gender, particularly the performance of femininity, becomes a site for the reclamation of women's care labor. Karen Helleckson contends that women, traditionally tasked by patriarchal culture with gifting aspects of their personality in order to manage social relations, are empowered by fan culture to perform an alternative, queered model of social exchange outside monetary value, which results in forms of social cohesion antithetical to patriarchy.[69] Helleckson's account of the way that fan culture allows women to queer the patriarchal dynamic of woman-as-gift provides insight into how ASMR functions as a strategy for reclaiming commodified care labor. ASMR, in its mimetic performance of care labor, allows women to act out care labor in an imagined community where care is not only valued, but intensely reciprocated by other performers. While it would be tempting to dismiss ASMR as a practice that reinscribes a patriarchal linking of women and care work, I contend that the ASMR gift economy recontextualizes care as a creative and ludic activity. ASMR's playful reimagining of affective labor emphasizes social solidarity, reciprocal exchange over commodity relations, and foregrounds emotional and physical presence in a virtual medium. The danger inherent to ASMR is that as performers professionalize and streams are monetized, that ASMR will lose its playfulness and become just another form of work. As audiences expand and the demands of quality recording and for higher production values increases, it becomes difficult for performers to not seek compensation for their work.

ASMR, utopia, and consumer desire

ASMR is a young media practice, but its development and expansion since its inception in 2009 has been rapid. The overwhelming dominance of women in ASMR has begun to shift as an increasing number of men join the practice, which will undoubtedly change how ASMR is practiced and understood. However, as I have hoped to elucidate in this paper, early iterations of online ASMR manifest some distinctly utopian valences for its female practitioners and its audience. However, ASMR's blend of media haptics and its mobilization of affect is so potent that the likelihood of the practice staying limited to a relatively small network of performers, or even of the practice staying bound to the small subculture from whence it originates, is unlikely. ASMR is on the verge of becoming a more broadly exploited technique of the senses, ripe for integration into mediums like music, advertising, film, and virtual reality. Experimental electronic musician Holly Herndon, for example, used ASMR sound effects in her 2015 album *Platform*. The migration of ASMR techniques from small women's subculture to contemporary art practices signals that the next step for ASMR is its entrance into mass culture.

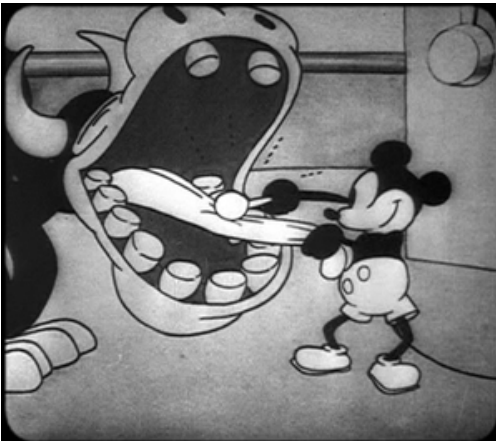
There is nothing inherently emancipatory about ASMR as a technique of the senses, or about the larger category of expanded media haptics toward which the global market is gravitating in search of increasingly immersive new media technologies. This tendency towards immersion is evident in Vivian Sobchack periodization of photography, film, and digital computers as technologies that marked three large-scale epistemic breaks within capitalist modernity: realism, modernism, and post-modernity, respectively.[70] From the invention of film in the late-1890's to the contemporary predominance of the digital screen, there is a clear escalation of immersion and interactivity in media. The portable screen of cell phones and other digital interfaces represents a big step in the tendency towards immersion in media, not only de-temporalizing the user and creating a sense of diffuse embodiment, but also allowing the user's body to be in constant

commercial uses ASMR's grammar of display. The neatly arranged row of chocolate bars and the extreme close up of a finger crinkling the corner of the wrapper mine the visual codes established in ASMR videos.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhwYbH5n15c>



Modern Times (1936). The Little Tramp's body struggles to keep up with the pace of technologized industrial life in which even eating is assisted by machines.



Steam Boat Willie (1928). Mickey using a cow's teeth as a xylophone. For Benjamin, the slapstick violence of early Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin's physical comedy experienced in the collective spectatorial context of the movie theater provided a cathartic release, "psychic immunization against ...mass psychosis," caused by the technologization of life and death in modernity.

interactive relation to the screen, perpetually bathed in the screen's light .[71]

Virtual reality has been heralded as the teleological apotheosis of this immersive tendency.[72] Where sophisticated virtual reality was once the province of research labs and military simulations, the entrance onto the mass market of relatively affordable virtual reality devices like Oculus Rift signals that immersive media will only undergo further expansion. ASMR's "three-dimensional" binaural sound is significant not only because it proposes almost as high a degree of immersion as VR through much simpler technological means, but because ASMR's binaural recording technique reinvigorates the traditional cinematic-televisual sound-image relation. ASMR not only lends an established medium like television advertising a new sonic immersiveness, but brings television advertising closer to more contemporary immersive technologies. A 2015 Dove chocolate commercial produced for Chinese markets features a foil wrapper binaurally recorded to emphasize its crinkling, signaling ASMR's entrance into advertising.[73]

Thus we can see how expanded media sentience is always a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it offers new modes of sensuous engagement with the material world (and thus potentially new ways of being), and on the other hand, it offers new and ever more intimate ways of infiltrating the lives of potential consumers. The double-edged nature of expanded media sentience is evident even in practices that far predate ASMR, namely experimental and genre film. ASMR seems to me irrefutably linked to what Linda Williams calls "the body genres" and to certain experimental film practices, particularly what Tom Gunning terms the "cinema of attractions" in which display and wonderment are prized over narrative development.[74] As Miriam Hansen points out, the films that Walter Benjamin himself was interested in were not classical Hollywood or French poetic realism, but rather slapstick, Mickey Mouse cartoons, and early surrealist film.[75] Benjamin proposed that these films could provide sensory training because of how they engaged the body and mobilized an affectively intense process of collective viewing.[76]

However, as film history has shown us, many of the positive aspects of the cinema of attractions went "underground" into artisanal modes of production and viewing, as is the case with experimental film.[77] The history of twentieth century film does not quite bear out Benjamin's utopian proposition that film could serve as a proletarian training ground for the senses. Instead, narrative psychological dramas reflecting the hegemonic values of the bourgeoisie came to dominate commercial screens. Simultaneously, the tendencies evident in early experimental film of display and attraction became central strategies to inciting consumer desire in advertising[78]. I point out these earlier developments in experimental film because I believe they highlight what is so particular about technologies in their early stages before they are captured by capital. ASMR at this precise historical juncture of extreme bioderegulation and neoliberalization does not yet circulate exclusively as a commodity in the global market, but rather, still functions on the model of gift exchange, prizing women's experience and an ethics of care.

ASMR practice, with its modest proposition of making the viewer feel good, challenges the traditional devaluation of women's work and represents a form of reparation for the somatic tax placed on bodies by postmodern regimes of labor, while pushing the very boundaries of mediatic sentience by means of a few simple and widely available technologies. To understand ASMR in its early utopian dimensions helps us remember that technological developments can be driven by values antithetical to capital. ASMR as a reparative media practice takes back both time and embodiment from what Jonathan Crary calls the "expanding non-stop life-world of twenty-first century capitalism." [79] In exchange, it provides the simple, but ever-elusive state of embodied presence.



Above, iconic still from Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), where an extreme close-up of actress Simone Mareuil's eye precedes a cut to a cow's eyeball being sliced with a straight razor. Right, 1954 Ohrbach's department store print ad where the extreme close-up on the model's eyes drives home the idea that the average woman can afford to buy anything she can see. The Ohrbach's ad not only uses similar framing of the eyes, but also mimics *Un Chien*'s masking of the bottom half of the face to emphasize the primacy of vision.



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Notes

1. In her 1998 book, *The Fantasy Factory*, Amy Flowers identifies phone sex as the “disembodiment of intimacy,” a development which she understood as pernicious for all social relations. Flowers, Amy. *The Fantasy Factory: An Insider's View of the Phone Sex Industry*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
2. Williams, Linda. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”*, Expanded Edition. Reprint edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
3. Krauss, Rosalind. “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *OCTOBER*, Spring 1976.
4. Ibid., 52.
5. Ibid.
6. This tendency is not new and has a longer history like the long playing records available in the 60's to aid meditation and yoga.
7. Critics like Eva Illouz argue that rather than create a rationalistic present, unemotional present, late-stage capitalism produces a hyper-emotional relation to everyday life, in which intimate relationships provide less and less comfort, as these relationships are increasingly governed by economic logics. For Illouz, the growth of the self-help industry is an index of these shifting social relations. Illouz, Eva. *Cold Intimacies : The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007.
8. In recent years, “sound studies” has emerged as an interdisciplinary field distinct from the traditional music department. For more, see: Dyson, Frances. *Sounding New Media : Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Eshun, Kodwo. *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet Books, 1999. Sterne, Jonathan. *The Sound Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
9. The term binaural refers to a type of stereo sound recording which not only captures right-ear, left-ear sound perception, but often uses prosthetic ears to mimic the way that sound travels through the human ear canal.
10. I use the term ‘haptic,’ to describe the way that audio visual media can produce tactile sensations in the viewer through textural qualities in the image, and through particular conjunctions between sound, vibrations, and image. Haptic, in this sense, refers more to the synesthetic qualities of visual art first theorized by Austrian art historian Alois Riegl, rather than to haptic technologies like touch screen digital media interfaces. The term haptic gets taken up in certain strains of film and media studies context to indicate visual media's virtual and affective characteristics. For other authors who use this expanded definition of the haptic, see Cranny-Francis, Anne. *Technology and Touch : The Biopolitics of Emerging Technologies*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY:

Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 and Marks, Laura U. *Touch: Sensuous Theory And Multisensory Media*. 1 edition. Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2002.

11. Brennan, Teresa. *Globalization and Its Terrors: Daily Life in the West*. London; New York: Routledge, 2003, 19-32. Brennan contends that increased automation, rather than reducing work, actually increases the duration and intensity of labor time by demanding that workers keep pace with machines. The physical and psychological toll of exceeding the human body's physical and psychological limits results in bioderegulation. Brennan cites urban sprawl and increasing commute times to work as one major driver of the bioderegulated condition. Longer commute times extend the workday, place an inordinate stress on workers, and compound the environmental effects of the 24/7 global economy.
12. Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," (2nd version) in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005).
- 13 Whispering Life. "Whisper 1 – hello!" Filmed [March 2009] YouTube video, 1:46. Posted [March 2009]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHtgPbfTgKc>
14. Online communities like the Steady Health forum, the 'Society of Sensationalists' Yahoo! Group, and the 'Unnamed Feeling' Blog began discussing the sensation now called ASMR as early as 2007. The feeling was often described in forums as 'orgasm.' Debates about what the sensation should be called raged until 2010 when Jennifer Allen coined the term 'Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response.' This term gained general acceptance because it downplayed the eroticism of ASMR practices in favor of a more neurological-sounding moniker. Despite the fact that the tingling and shivers now called ASMR existed before it became a subculture, the 2009 video cited above is the first time that ASMR appears as a video-based YouTube practice.
15. See Stuckler, David, and Sanjay Basu. *The Body Economic [Electronic Resource]: Why Austerity Kills : Recessions, Budget Battles, and the Politics of Life and Death*. New York: Basic Books, 2013. And Roelfs, David J., Eran Shor, Karina W. Davidson, and Joseph E. Schwartz. "Losing Life and Livelihood: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Unemployment and All-Cause Mortality." *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) 72, no. 6 (March 2011): 840–54. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21330027>
16. See Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2011. Konings, Martijn. *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism : What Progressives Have Missed*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015.
17. Konings, Martijn. *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism*, 96.
18. Brennan, Teresa. *Globalization and Its Terrors*, 29. Also see Crary, Jonathan. *24/7 : Terminal Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London; Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2013.
19. Benjamin, Walter, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," (1939) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2006).
20. Barratt, Emma L., and Nick J. Davis. "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A Flow-like Mental State." *PeerJ* 3 (March 26, 2015) <https://peerj.com/articles/851/>. And Campo, Marisa A. del, and Thomas J. Kehle. "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) and Frisson: Mindfully Induced Sensory Phenomena That Promote Happiness." *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology* 4, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): 99–105.

21. Miller, Jenni. "Whispering on The Internet Is Paying This Woman's Rent." *Cosmopolitan*, June 8, 2015.
<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/lifestyle/a40025/gentlewhispering-maria-Internets-most-fascinating/>.
22. Though performers are beginning to monetize their ASMR channels through crowdfunding websites like Patreon, this funding mostly serves to finance the financing of recording equipment and a growing variety of ASMR props.
23. Hardt, Michael. "Affective Labor." *Boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999): 89–100, 89.
24. As discussed in the introduction to this essay, this narcissistic self-presentation is apparent in early video art experiments and runs through to the selfie. As Rosalind Krauss asserts, narcissism is the "medium" of video. Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 50. [[return to page 2](#)]
25. Ihde, Don. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. 2nd ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.
26. Barthes, Roland, "The Grain of the Voice," in Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 188.
27. Ibid, 183.
28. GentleWhispering. "~.~Eye gazing, ear-to-ear blowing, head massagers~.~" Filmed [March 2014]. YouTube video, 22:09. Posted [March 2014].
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_haPLEHgh8Y
29. While binaural recorders have existed since 1933, the recent growing popularity of ASMR and Virtual Reality has spurred companies like 3Dio to produce special binaural recorders with plastic ears on each side of the device to simulate more closely the experience of sound entering the ear canal.
30. Jousse, Marcel. *The Oral Style*. New York: Garland Pub, 1990.
31. McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy; the Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1962, 27.
32. Ibid, 21.
33. See Olsen, Tillie. *Silences*. 25th anniversary ed., 1st Feminist Press . New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003. And Russ, Joanna, and Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture. *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, n.d.
34. Rangan, Pooja. "In Defense of Voicelessness." *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 3 (July 1, 2015): 95–126. <http://fmh.ucpress.edu/content/1/3/95.full>
35. Dyson, Frances. "The Genealogy of the Radio Voice," in Augaitis, Daina, Dan Lander, Walter Phillips Gallery, and Banff Centre for the Arts, eds. *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound, and Transmission*. Banff, Alta., Canada: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1994.
36. Bartky, Sandra. "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in Diamond, Irene, and Lee Quinby. *Feminism & Foucault : Reflections on Resistance*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988.
37. Mauss, Marcel. "Techniques of the Body," in Crary, Jonathan, and Sanford Kwinter, eds. *Incorporations*. 1st Ed. edition. New York, NY: Zone Books, 1992.
38. This is the most widely held definition of Benjamin's aura because it is the one

that appears in *Illuminations*, for many U.S. readers the first access to the Art Work essay, or any of Benjamin's works. As Miriam Hansen exhaustively documents in the fourth chapter of *Cinema and Experience*, "Aura: The Appropriation of a Concept," the version of the Art Work essay which appears in *Illuminations* was famously edited by Adorno, who tried to strip the concept of aura of its mystical valences, as well as to shape the essay to more easily fit into existing critical aesthetic Marxist debates. Hansen, Miriam. *Cinema and Experience : Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 104-131.

39. And Benjamin, Walter. "Little History of Photography," in Benjamin, Walter, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 1: 1927-1930*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005), 512-14.

40. Benjamin, Walter. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire."

41. Ibid., 338.

42. Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," (2nd version)

43. Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film : Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, 138. [[return to page 3](#)]

44. Ibid, 139.

45. Benjamin, Walter. "Little History of Photography," 517.

46. Ganz, Cheryl. *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: Century of Progress*. University of Illinois Press, 2008, 78-9.

47. Ibid, 78.

48. As of 2016, for example, Maria has started listing her equipment in her video descriptions—two Blue Microphone Spark Condensers, a Zoom Portable Recorder, and a Canon Powershot digital camera.

49. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFj1DMtCWdU&t=434s>

50. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUvYNbelSSo>

51. The cinematic gaze as inherently fetishistic and gendered male is put forth by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 6–18. <https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/16/3/6/1603296?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

52. Koch, Gertrude. "Exchanging the gaze: Revisioning Feminist Film Theory," *New German Critique*, No. 34, Winter, 147.

53. Marks, Laura U. *Touch: Sensuous Theory And Multisensory Media*. 1st edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 10-11.

54. Hansen, Mark B. N. (Mark Boris Nicola). *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004, 10.

55. One recent psychology study links ASMR susceptibility to personality traits like Neuroticism and Openness-to-Experience. See Fredborg, Beverley, Jim Clark, and Stephen D. Smith. "An Examination of Personality Traits Associated with Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR)." *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (February 23, 2017).

56. Perlman, Marc. "Golden Ears and Meter Readers: The Contest for Epistemic Authority in Audiophilia." *Social Studies of Science* 34, no. 5 (2004): 783–807.

57. See Oksala, Johanna. "Affective Labor and Feminist Politics." *Signs* 41, no. 2 (2016): 281–303. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/682920>
And Weeks, Kathi. "Life within and against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics Ephemera." *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, vol 7 (1): 246-247, 2007.
<http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/life-within-and-against-work-affective-labor-feminist-critique-and-post-fordist> [return to page 4]

58. Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, 4.

59. Hardt, Michael. "Affective Labor," 89.

60. Costa, Mariarosa dalla, and Selma James. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community: Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. For more on recent sociological accounts of migration and the personal care economy, see: Kang, Miliann. *The Managed Hand [Electronic Resource]: Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. And Anderson, Bridget, and Isabel Shutes. *Migration and Care Labour: Theory, Policy and Politics*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

64. Weeks, Kathi. "Life within and against Work," 245. **[put in bibliography]**

Ibid, 246-247.

66. Hardt, Michael. "Affective Labor," 99.

67. Kollock, Peter. "The Economies of Online Cooperation: Gifts and Public Goods in Cyberspace" in ed. Kollock, Peter, and Marc A. Smith. *Communities in Cyberspace*. London ; New York: Routledge, 1999, 220-242. Also see: Penley, Constance. *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America*. Londo ; New York: Verso, 1997.

68. Sabotini, Rachel. "Fanfic Symposium: The Fannish Potlatch." December 20, 1999, <http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp41.htm>.

69. Hellekson, Karen. "A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture." *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 116.

70. Sobchack, Vivian Carol. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 135-162.

71. Ibid, 156-162.

72. As Ken Hillis reminds us, this drives towards immersion, at once a drive towards complete simulation, is a Western ideological project of subjecting "space, information, and identity" to rational control. Hillis, Ken. *Digital Sensations: Space, Identity, and Embodiment in Virtual Reality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, xvii.

73. Dove. "Chinese Sihua Dove ASMR ad campaign – Angelababy." Filmed [2015]. YouTube video, Posted [April 2016]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhwYbH5n15c>
74. See Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle*, 8, no. nos. 3 & 4 (Fall 1986). And Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2–13. <http://fq.ucpress.edu/content/44/4/2>
75. Hansen, Miriam. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 82.
76. Ibid, 89-101. And Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," (2nd version)
77. Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attractions," 2.
78. The extreme close-up, the zoom, montage, and abstraction are all techniques that Gunning calls "exhibitionistic confrontation" developed within early film and later, within experimental film, that eventually entered advertising's visual vernacular. For example, the zoom and extreme close-ups that Gunning alies with "exhibitionistic confrontation" would become important strategies in figuring various kinds of commercial products in a spectacularized way. Eisensteinian montage, the juxtaposition of unlike images edited together for maximum visual and ideological impact, have become a fundamental aspect of television commercials and broadcast news. Additionally, there have been experimental filmmakers like Walter Ruttmann, who both films and ttman, who made experimental mercials gical means, d in the screen'th femininity and gendered labor. understanding whmade experimental films and worked in advertising. For Ruttmann, abstract animation was a key visual aesthetic in both occupations. On Ruttmann, see: Cowan, Michael J. *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity: Avant-Garde, Advertising, Modernity*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014.
79. Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Terminal Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London; Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2013, 8.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *In Country*:



Archival footage recorded in Vietnam.



Observational footage recorded in the Oregon woods, juxtaposed in the film to call attention to its historical referent. The tack and yaw between present and past footage recurs throughout the film. In the sidebar below are examples of other pairings.

Being there again: reenacting camerawork in *In Country* (2014)

by [Andy Rice](#)

Recurring evidence of the Vietnam War

Though now fifty years in the past, the Vietnam War remains vivid in U.S. collective memory. Most recently, stories in Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's eighteen hour PBS series *The Vietnam War* (2017) have elicited critics' parallels to ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and renewed nationalist hubris.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] As with Novick and Burns' previous war films, *The Vietnam War* draws its storyline and affective power from combining personal interviews, photographs from family albums, revelatory "behind the scenes" recordings of key figures in presidential administrations, and archival film materials and still photographs recorded by journalists who were there in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Jamie Baron's theory of the "archive effect" aptly describes the popular reception of the various kinds of media in Burns' work, as well as many other historical documentaries. Materials that viewers experience as "found" in *The Vietnam War* produce a "temporal disparity" between present day interview and historical footage (Baron, 2012, p. 106). This experiential dynamic carries with it the authorizing power of the state institutions that once maintained archives, regardless of whether or not Novick and Burns gathered their materials in such places. However, "found footage" in a film about the Vietnam War must not inevitably be read as "of" the past in this way.

In contrast to *The Vietnam War*, *In Country* (2014), a documentary about men from Oregon who reenact battles from the Vietnam War, situates the war very much in the here and now of performance. What Barron calls the "proliferation of indexical documents outside of official archives" into spaces like YouTube here seems to have been internalized by this film's reenactor subjects—who have watched numerous documentaries, YouTube clips, and Hollywood films about the Vietnam War (102). During the reenactment, they project something of these viewing experiences onto the world and each other for reasons that vary by person.



Near the end of *In Country*, the Vietnam War reenactor subjects of the film let boys at a parade hold their M-16s to pose for a photograph. When I asked director Mike Attie about the functionality of reenactors' weapons, he offered the following explanation: "My understanding is that the reenactors use a combination of de-commissioned period weapons and blank-firing replicas. There is some kind of modification that is done to the tip of the barrel that keeps it from firing live rounds."



The reenactors standing at attention at the beginning of their weekend long reenactment in Oregon.



Archival footage: A soldier standing at attention

How then are we to make sense of this internalization of the indexical and the filmmakers' efforts in turn to document those somewhat unobservable experiences of the past on film? The complexities of representing the subject of reenactment, first through camerawork and then through the peculiar integration of archival footage in this film, are the topics at the heart of this article. I aim to show that rather than imbuing the film with the authority of "being there" and the stamp of official history, observational and found footage in *In Country* suggests contours of the collective psyche in the present. The logic of time in the film is recursive rather than linear—a symptom more broadly of the sensible structure of time in the digital age. It demands a different way of thinking about evidence.

Specifically, the article considers the place of the reenactor body and camerawork in documentary theory. I aim to tease out an argument about temporality and the experience of evidence. Though *In Country* employs a conventional documentary blend of observational recording, interview, and archival footage, reenactment both in front of and behind the camera catalyzes constructions of the documentary real in the film in an unusual way. Centrally at stake in producing the film was a tension between the subject, a war reenactment performance of *past events with stakes*, and the filmmakers' initial instincts to make the film about the reenactment using observational cinema methods like those once employed by journalists in Vietnam. Such cinematography emphasizes "being there" with a camera so as to attend to *events in the present believed to have stakes*.^[2]

I focus on this tension to revisit documentary theory about the core concept of *indexicality*, usually understood in film and media studies to refer to the existential connection between a photographic image and an event that once

in Vietnam as he listens to a speech by General William Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968.



Archival footage of a non-commissioned officer in Vietnam interviewed by a male journalist. “You came here at full strength?” the journalist asks. “I had thirteen men when I came,” the soldier responds. “It’s four days later now and how many are still here?” The soldier answers in a softer voice, “six.”



On the second day of their weekend-long reenactment in Oregon, reenactors Vinh Nguyen (left) and Lucien “Doc” Darendsburg (right) take a break from their patrol in the rain to smoke cigarettes together.

occurred in front of the lens. I use the film *In Country* to argue for theorizing indexicality through the embodied experience of “touch” with the past rather than through technologies of inscription per se. Touch is intersubjective here, as it is constituted in the space between performers who depend on one another to display cues of the past, as well as upon camerapersons, editors, and viewers who make sense of the past as they experience the present. The appeal of reenactment as productive of a complex indexical touch, I argue, reflects a social context shaped by the virtualization of image, camera, and distribution platforms. Internalized cinematic conventions shape how the reenactors see.

The reenactors’ seeing, in turn, quite literally shaped how the filmmakers’ “observational” camerawork could be done in *In Country*. Vietnam War reenacting is a subculture deeply invested in collective, embodied mimesis as a route to authentic feeling and discovery. For this reason, the thirteen or so reenactors featured in the film very much wanted to find a way for the filmmakers to contribute to the aesthetic realism of their immersive scenario. Unlike some other units of reenactors, the subjects of *In Country* perform only for one another and not for general audiences or outside observers. Not included in the diegesis of the film is the fact that Attie and O’Hara were dressed as Vietnam era war correspondents, which was the reenactors’ condition for the filmmakers’ access to make the documentary.

In other words, the filmmakers had to reenact in order to “be there.”

“Being there” with a camera *so as to avoid the need for staging and reenactment* was the explicit goal of 1960s direct cinema and observational cinema. How might we to make sense of this apparent paradox? Below, I start by considering camerawork as a live performance practice. I argue that the cameraperson’s decisions at the moment of recording are indexical gestures touching camerawork of the past. Perhaps for inextricable connections to recording, the live act of camerawork has not been considered as a kind of performance through the lens of performance theory, but this body of theory offers analytical tools that may be brought to bear in new ways on questions that have long been central to film studies and documentary studies about the indexicality of the image. I also draw from Vivian Sobchack’s work on the phenomenology of film viewing experience to tease out the relations between past time and personal knowledge somewhat blurred together by repeated reenactment events. History played over and over again by reenactors starts to become as personal as a home movie.

Last, my analysis draws from an insight central to the work of cinema historian Anne Friedberg (1991), who framed the emergence of the cinema outside of camera and screen technologies. Friedberg argued that it was walking past the tantalizing window displays of shopping malls that primed late 19th century consumers for the cinema. Realism attributed to the mechanical nature of the camera had less to do with cinema’s growth, in her account, than did the chance for an emerging group of consumers—especially middle-class white women in cities—to experience a new kind of empowerment outside the home. I argue here for the inverse in the context of digital culture, where images are ubiquitous and cameras are themselves virtual—increasingly part of “my phone” rather than professional tools for recording watershed events. As the reenactors walk together through foliage in Oregon, for example, they project desires for “touch” with the Vietnam War as understood from a mélange of Hollywood movies, training manuals, documentaries, and personal experiences of war. Starting with reenactment instead of the image requires thinking differently about the concept of indexicality. Derived from the concept of the index in the tripartite semiotic system of late 19th century U.S. philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce, descriptions of indexicality in his writing refer more broadly to the relation between the perceiving body and phenomena in the world that conjure past



Juxtapositions from *In Country*. In the archival black and white image on top, a young soldier recounts to a journalist the harrowing experience of being ambushed and pinned down while hearing the cries of wounded U.S. troops. He is trying to describe the event in a letter home to his father. The color image on bottom shows David “Cricket” Safina-Massey near the end of the film, a baby-faced high school student who has enlisted in the Marines, sharing a beer with the other reenactors at the conclusion of their weekend together. He proudly reveals his enlistment to the camera about thirty minutes into the film in a scene that resonates backwards and forwards in time as we hear about the struggles of young soldiers in Vietnam like the one above. Portland brewer Matt Kinney is visible on the right side of the frame.



Hayden “Bummy” Baumgartner (left) congratulates his fellow reenactors on a successful weekend over a shared beer. “Doc” Darenburg is visible on the right side of the frame.

events—what I regard as the experience of reenactment.

I develop this argument in four major sections. First, I revisit writing in documentary studies on the concept of indexicality to then excavate qualities of subjective perception in Peirce’s 1895 writing on this particular category of sign. Second, I reflect on my own experience as a documentary cameraperson who made a film about participating in Revolutionary War reenactments. I tease out reservations about the limitations of reenactment as a documentary method with an eye toward a reading of *In Country*. Third, I summarize *In Country* for readers who may not have seen the film. Fourth, I draw from interviews with the filmmakers and close analysis of three scenes to deconstruct the process of making the film. I question the invocation of “being there” as the de facto gold standard of documentary value, which turned out to be inadequate for the filmmakers of *In Country* to tell the story of the reenactment. And I re-interpret the use of archival footage in the film through the concept of reenactment. I conclude by offering the term “intersubjective indexicality” as a contribution to theorizing documentary experience moving forward.

Meditations on a rolling gait: a return to indexicality

Many documentary theorists worried that the rise of digital imagery starting in the early 1990s posed a crisis for the field. Assuming the materiality of the image was central to arguments about the ethics of documentary work. The image of actual injustice, dignity, or struggle could lead viewers to greater awareness, reflection, critical thinking, and capacities for action to redress perceived wrongs. If the digital image is made up of zeroes and ones that are materially indistinguishable from software programs used to manipulate them, this line of theory contends, then the image itself can no longer serve as a reliable index of events in the world. Digital images did not touch the world in the same way.

Brian Winston, Gail Vanstone, and Wang Chi recently reopened this debate in their take on “digital’s loosening of the referential bond” and implications for a film’s claims to represent reality on technical grounds (Winston, Vanstone, and Chi, 2017). While these authors still focus on screen materials (and especially on computer graphics that fool viewers) instead of bodies per se, they emphasize that it is not the camera or the screen that determines “documentary value” in the 21st century documentary. As they write, the

“weakening of photographic image integrity now gives [reenactment and reconstruction techniques] a legitimacy which [they] previously lacked.” **[give page number]**

My aim in looking at camerawork and embodied reenactment here is to build on this line of argument, but in doing so to decouple documentary ontology from its traditional object, the finished film, without also giving up on the concept of



Juxtapositions from *In Country*. "Bummy" Baumgartner describes to the filmmakers in an interview at the reenactment how the hobby helps him to "go back" for a few hours to his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam. The black and white image on the bottom is a photograph featured in the film of Baumgartner as a young officer near the time of his deployment. In the film, these two images appear in the same scene.



Juxtapositions from *In Country*. Charles "Tuna" Ford hugs his sons at Joint Base Lewis-McChord immediately after returning from a tour of duty in Afghanistan. The bottom image shows Ford dressed in his Vietnam era army uniform and marching in a parade.

indexicality and the ethical claims it brings in tow.

The term *indexicality* entered the lexicon of film studies with Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1972), which adapted the semiotic system of late 19th century U.S. philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce for the field. Wollen mapped Peirce's semiotics onto ideas about the power of the photographic image and the cinema expressed by 1950s French film theorist André Bazin. In "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," (1960), Bazin claimed that the medium of film was particularly well suited to realist representation because a photograph, while resembling objects before the lens, "actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it" (18).

Read through Peirce's semiotic system, Wollen argued, Bazin was describing the cinema as primarily indexical. As opposed to iconic signs, which bore a resemblance to referents, and symbolic signs, which signified meaning within cultural systems like language rather than perceptual similarity or proximity to referents, indexical signs were physically, materially constituted of their referents, like the weather vane to the wind, the footprint to the foot, or, in this case, the photograph to the camera. It is worth noting that Wollen was making an argument about the nature of film rather than the situatedness of understanding time. In one passage oft quoted in film and media studies, Peirce characterized the photographic process as indexical:

"Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection" (106).

Peirce understood the process of composite photography, in which multiple negatives were seamlessly spliced together to make one image, but downplaying the subjective, expressive dimensions of photography was in keeping with the spirit of late 19th century intellectual life, a moment in which social science disciplines staked claims in the academy as inheritors of the natural sciences (Winston and Tsang). This understanding of the term indexicality was taken up in film studies, where it still refers predominantly to the technological processes of mechanical reproduction, "physically forced" connection between photograph and world, and evidentiary inscription.

Authors including Mary Anne Doane (2007a and b), Bill Nichols (1991), and David Rodowick (2007) have found the concept of indexicality useful for emphasizing the materiality of the image and the ethical obligations of spectators who understand existential connections between events in the world and images of such events. Each has warned that the referential, evidentiary quality of film compared to other plastic arts erodes with the turn from analog film to digital media. Doane (2007b) even called "digital media" a contradiction in terms, as digital creations aim toward the erasure of medium specificity rather than establishing physical, material limits for exploration through a particular art practice. Digital photographs and moving images, such theorists argued, were essentially made of code, of nothing. Software programs like Photoshop were made of the same immaterial stuff, and could alter digital images without detection.

This line of thinking threw the status of media indexicality and the field of



Juxtapositions from *In Country's* "Bonus Materials." Top, filmmakers Meghan O'Hara (left) and Mike Attie (right) reflect on their experiences making the film. The black and white production stills below show the two filmmakers dressed as 1970s war correspondents in Vietnam, with the exception of their digital recording equipment, during the weekend long reenactment.

documentary studies into question. To take one prominent example, leading documentary theorist Jane Gaines referred in her introduction to *Collecting Visible Evidence* (1999) to what Bill Nichols called the "indexical whammy" that analog documentary film enjoyed over fiction to ask the question that simulation technologies seemed to pose to a field grounded in the evidentiary status of film: "If it can no longer be said that documentary has reality on its side, what can be said of it?" While acknowledging that "much is at stake" in "giving up the rhetorical clout that comes with the claim of 'evidence' of the real," Gaines suggested moving documentary theory forward through the concept of resemblance, or iconicity, and leaving behind "the impossible claim to indexicality" (6). She argued that most viewers did not distinguish between analog and digital imagery, and intimated that critical obsession over the difference between the two was misplaced. Theorizing the relation between image and the real, she suggested, should thus take more seriously a variety of cultural products considered out of bounds by previous generations of documentary scholars, including simulation programs and video games, animations, and reality television shows.

Vivian Sobchack's (1999) contribution to this volume offered the insightful point that "documentary is less a *thing* than an *experience*" and proposed parsing out ways of viewing into fictional, home movie, and documentary "modes of consciousness" that had more to do with the meeting point of cultural conventions and the personal experiences of the viewer than the image itself (241). Subsequent articles on reenactment in documentary film by Nichols (2008), Jonathan Kahana (2009), Deirdre Boyle (2009), and Rowena Santos-Aquino (2012), as well as works by filmmakers like Rithy Panh, Josh Oppenheimer, and Errol Morris that employed reenactment techniques in innovative (and controversial) ways further moved the field of documentary studies from its grounding in the concept of indexicality as understood in its narrowly technological sense. This has proven to be an influential direction.

Yet consensus on what it is that grounds documentary theory if not indexicality, a weighty connection between image perceived and the real, remains elusive. Niels Niessen proposed a noteworthy turn on the concept in his 2011 publication in *Screen*, arguing that the index always embedded within it the dynamic between the film and the spectator's way of seeing. The index, in his telling, emerges at the meeting point between the historical context of the sign's creation, and the spectator's subjective apprehension of this moment in their own space and time, laden as that moment is with iconic and symbolic contextual factors that facilitate indexical recognition.

Writing in 2017, with nearly two decades more perspective on digital filmmaking than the authors featured in Gaines and Michael Renov's *Collecting Visible Evidence* (1999), Winston, Vanstone, and Chi revisited the position of the spectator unmoored from analog indexicality, and now more at the mercy of convincing digital fabrications of, for instance, mythical sea beasts like the Megalodon pedaled somewhat successfully as documentary fare by the Discovery Channel. More broadly, the authors claimed that the manipulability of digital imagery had indeed radically transformed documentary practice and cultural perceptions of what counted as historical evidence, even if not all filmmakers treated their moving images as endlessly malleable digital canvases. They pointed to Peirce's writing on composite photography and icons, which he wrote "so completely substituted for their objects as hardly to be distinguished from them," to suggest that Peirce's theory accounted for the dual nature of photographs. They argued that photographs mediate between maker and viewer much like paintings, sculpture, and other forms of art imagery. "That is to say they are iconic as they are indexical," the authors conclude.



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Juxtapositions from *In Country* of materials used to depict Lucien "Doc" Darenburg. From top to bottom, photographs on the wall at Darenburg's house. Darenburg during a tour of duty as a medic in Iraq. Darenburg reenacting as a Vietnam era soldier at the encampment in Oregon.

Here I want to revisit Peirce's writing on the index, which offers a broader definition of the term than the one typically used in film studies. And in excavating the implications of his other examples for my analysis of *In Country*, I intend to center indexicality in the experiencing body over the image. This is not to dismiss image-making practices culturally marked as documentary, which might be grouped by their shared intention towards conjuring "touch" with the past in a variety of ways. Indeed, the ubiquity of images in our everyday lives forces us to internalize contents, cultural conventions of spectatorship, and practices of image making, and so cannot be ignored.

But I do make the claim that documentary experience need not—indeed cannot—start in the image, photographic or otherwise. While the makers of *In Country* shot in an observational style and did not manipulate their footage in post, the records of reenactors in the woods were not the focal point of evidence that registered as such for the filmmakers. Rather, they found "touch" with the past unexpectedly, more like in Peirce's offhand example of a man with a rolling gait than in his more often quoted characterization of the photograph.

In his taxonomy of the index, Peirce included examples of indexical signs that had less to do with scientific instruments than with the subjective sensation of being startled by particular perceptions. In one instance, he considered his perception of a man's "rolling gait" as an indexical sign: "I see a man with a rolling gait. This is a probable indication that he is a sailor" (108). Between the two sentences, "I see..." and "This is a probable...", there is a tacit personal question: why did this man's walk strike *me* as notable? It compels Peirce to offer an explanation. It also arises from an observation of *performative* behavior, in Judith Butler's sense of the term—that is, the repeated activities, gestures, or ways of thinking that produce, reinforce, and reify identity over time.[3] [\[open endnotes in new page\]](#) The performative utterance or gesture brings a state of affairs into being rather than describing a thing that already exists, and so constitute a politics.

Peirce refers to the reiterative labor process—working as a sailor—that might have caused the rolling gait in the late 1800s. But the grounds for the indexical sign to emerge at a moment in Peirce's mind did not develop quickly for the man who walked this way. If indeed the gait was the occupational byproduct that Peirce deduced, then the rolling gait indexed *a life* at sea. The gait perceived in an instant by Peirce "touches" the accumulation of past time. There was likely nothing startling about the style of walk for the man doing the walking, and it was not obvious that the "rolling gait" should register as a sign in a different context, perhaps closer to the docks, where it might simply be the way "we" walk.[4] It is a striking way of moving *to Peirce* and then perhaps to us as readers aiming to be in synchrony with his description. When he marks this man's walk as a "rolling gait," we readers can understand the startling aspect of what Peirce calls indexical signs, even if we cannot exactly envisage the reiterative walk cycle of Peirce's probable sailor of a now bygone era.

Peirce's example suggests a theory of thought centered on *the psychic experience of reenactment*. Here is the startling experience of perceiving difference that one can then explain only through imaginative speculation and further research or thinking. The walk is evidence, but that to which it points beyond the fact of difference remains unclear. It catalyzes further consideration of this particular man, and the set of life conditions that led him to walk this way. Touch with the



The memorabilia room at the home of reenactor Joel Kinney, seen early in the film.



Early on in the reenactment in Oregon, lead reenactor Joel Kinney lectures to the rest of the group about the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture.



The reenactors listen to Kinney's lesson on "period correct" language and 1960s cultural trends.



sign "rolling gait" is compelled and affective. It is a surge without codified meaning, generated intersubjectively and leaving the affected perceiver with work yet to do.

The process of perception, affect, and thought entailed in this example is the starting point for documentary work. Unexpected, contingent details emerge in the field of perception, beckoning further exploration and attempts at discovery. It is worth noting that the pleasure of viewing and re-viewing (or reenacting) direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* style documentary also depends upon the process that Pierce describes here. The rolling gait is a sign for Peirce that registers in a moment, but suggests a lifetime and a life world. Like Roland Barthes' concept of the punctum as "that accident [in the photograph] which pricks me," Pierce experiences a startling sensation at the moment of observing the rolling gait (Barthes, 26). This moment, the index, remains at the heart of documentary film practice, though it has little to do with technology per se. Peirce expands at greater length on the startling, ephemeral nature of the indexical sign:

"A rap on the door is an index. Anything which focuses the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index, in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience. Thus a tremendous thunderbolt indicates that *something* considerable happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was. But it may be expected to connect itself with some other experience" (108).

"Anything which focuses the attention" must mark its difference from other things for the subject doing the perceiving of it. There is a suddenness to these indexical signs—the rap at the door, the thunderbolt—that compels the perceiver to attend to it. Shifting to the domain of camerawork (and by extension film viewing experience), a cameraperson waits amid subjects before the lens for the emergence of *something* as striking as the rap on the door. It is perhaps a detail that others present or subsequent viewers might not notice, or might notice differently. And why *this something* as opposed to *that something* demands attention is a matter as difficult for filmmakers to articulate in the moment as reenactors who try to explain the appeal of what they do. In both cases, without the perceiving subject to experience this *something*, this indexical sign will not emerge.

This *something* opens possibilities for thinking about the interplay of various subjectivities and a situated theory of the index. Within this framework, we may theorize an indexical relation inhering in a felt, bodily sensation *mediated through* a photograph, weathervane, plumb bob, bullet mold. . . or embodied performance. The perceiving subject momentarily senses the past activities of another being, beings, or ecosystem in an intersubjective engagement. We may also consider the possibility that the presence of moving images, however horrific or sensational their contents, may not in themselves produce the sensation of their indexicality in a particular viewer. That which startles into rumination on history is contextual and contingent. It has no necessary relationship with a photograph. Neither should documentary theory.

Reenactment and camerawork: a personal take

Reenactment reopens the question about the relation between the trace and the body. Participants in a reenactment do not directly experience a traumatic past,

The first night of the reenactment, the group screens *Easy Rider* (1969), an iconic film about counterculture bikers travelling from Los Angeles to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, featured on screen here, play leading roles. Visible in the background on the right are the silhouettes of the reenactors' M-16 rifles.



Insecure officer giving a pep talk to his men. We do not yet know as viewers (though we might suspect from the Coke can) that we are in the woods of Oregon in 2010, and not in Vietnam in the 1970s.



Company commander describing the mission to his "troops."



Men wading across a river in Oregon, a shot echoed later in the film in archival footage from Vietnam.

but in performing a simulation of it, they become the carriers of its felt traces. These traces register *through* people's embodied reenactment *in the midst of performance* rather than *on* filmic material. Reenactment routinely serves as a method of inquiry in performance art, media archeology, living history, ritual commemoration, documentary filmmaking, television dramatization, and psychodrama therapy. Simulation training in fire, police, and military applications also makes use of precedent events, and function in practice much like war reenactments. Motivations for participating in reenactment events include working through personally traumatic experiences, producing a collective identity around the shared interpretation of an historical moment, or learning about embodied historical experience by simulating archaic material and technological constraints in the present.[5]

Film practitioners have generally viewed the transition from analog to digital media differently from theorists. Documentary filmmakers who saw inexpensive cameras, nonlinear editing software, and socially networked distribution platforms as material advantages for crafting empathic stories about their subjects largely ignored the crisis identified in documentary theory. For instance, when the occasionally dubbed "father of direct cinema" Albert Maysles was asked in 2002 for his thoughts on digital recording processes, he enumerated twenty-seven ways that shooting on digital video could "serve all the purposes that I've always had much, much better" than film, including the flip out screen, low cost, and more flexible shooting ratios.[6]

As a nonfiction filmmaker who learned on 16 mm film and then started working with DV in the early 2000s, I relished the advantages of digital media formats for making intimate, long-form documentaries free from intimidating needs for institutional funding and equipment. The small camera that could record an hour of tape at the cost of \$4 increased my chances of "capturing" unexpected, idiosyncratic, contingent events that would infuse my films with a sense of life. The virtualization and ubiquity of video production tools have posed other epistemological dilemmas, however. Always having a camera at the ready, and always thinking about how the present moment might be mined for a future time and different sort of recognition changed my process of perception. I looked for everyday life events that already seemed to have built in what people working in the film industry would call "high production values."

Between 2002 and 2005, I conducted a reverse participant ethnography and filmed with a group of New Englanders who reenacted battles from the U.S. Revolutionary War as 18th century British soldiers, commonly referred to as "the Redcoats." My documentary, titled *About Face!: Reenacting in a Time of War* (2010), explored how discourses on the then contemporaneous war in Iraq circulated through the bodies of those who played the part of America's "first enemy" in reenactment performances.[7] It was a documentary about something like what Michel Foucault called "biopolitics,"[8] about how state power is reproduced and enforced at the level of the subject body. But in hindsight, my twenty-two year-old self was also drawn to the subject because of the way the reenactment projected onto the world the contours of cinematic drama—lavish costumes, events that gestured at life and death stakes, complex points of identification, possibilities for humor, and clear timelines. The reenactments, in other words, were designed to attract cameras, and I fell for the lure. I dressed as a Redcoat and played the role of an 18th century infantryman in battle reenactments and training sessions to make the film. The experience led me to places that I did not expect, and at times into positions in which I was uncomfortable. My body projected a set of narratives about national identity with which I had significant and growing qualms.

And there is a similar tension in the *In Country* filmmakers' claim to have made a

film about “understanding” this group of Vietnam War reenactors. Cultural historians Brenda Boyle and Jeehyun Lee argued that at least some of the reenactors in the film have structured their performances of individual personhood and trauma to prevent engaging with “the complexities of military and foreign policies, the history of Viet Nam’s anticolonial struggles, or the ethics of the whole affair.” That Joel Kinney, the founder of the Vietnam War reenacting group featured in the film, described in the *In Country* Bonus Features his first experience seeing the film as “kind of like a father seeing his child portrayed in a positive manner” does little to dispel Boyle and Lee’s critique (Attie and O’Hara, 2014b).

In my case, reenactment posed other practical challenges to filming. To maintain the appearance of an 18th century soldier, I was not permitted to film while playing a role. I would videotape at events where I was not required to appear in uniform, and during one particularly large reenactment, my group permitted me to wear a well-concealed spy camera. But I usually had to rely on other camerapersons to film those events. As a participant, I was able to experience and speak at length with many reenactors about their strategies for thinking deeply about the struggles and everyday lives of 18th century people. These perspectives were at odds with most media reports about the reenactments, which typically rehashed narratives about “morally just” violence from the past to rationalize U.S. imperial ventures in the present. But they also did not address so well the question about why participants reenact. Verbalized answers to this question are too pat in many cases, or grounded in feelings not easily translated into words. The film historicized the rise of U.S. reenactment in the 1960s and 1970s amid white male anxieties about feminism, the Civil Rights Movement, and the turn from political to social history, which threatened the stability of celebratory stories about national origins.

Much of the film about the Revolutionary War reenactment focused on a reenactor with Native American ancestry who had served as a sniper in Vietnam and Desert Storm, and communicated about his experiences to me through references to popular films like *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Rambo* (1982), and *Enemy at the Gates* (2001). His experiences as a soldier seemed to give him unusual affective tools through which to understand battles of the past. When we once stood together on what seemed to me yet another empty historic battlefield, for instance, he told me that just being there “made the hairs stand up on the back of [his] neck.” While I learned a great deal from this particular reenactor, recording such sentiments using mostly observational shooting methods was difficult. I leaned heavily on conversational filming and voiceover to communicate, sometimes speculatively, about that which could not be seen. The filmmakers of *In Country* dealt with a similar problem in a different way.

Reenacting and filming reenactment did open for me a way for thinking about documentary as a form of experience rather than a genre of film. Reenactment experience generates something like what Sobchack (1999) called “a documentary mode of consciousness,” here applied to the performed world rather than the screen (246). Sobchack wrote about documentary consciousness as being like the mentality of the apprentice, searching the screen for cues to learn things of cultural importance. Similarly, reenactors who roleplay as Redcoats in their leisure time are learning from the same manual as their 18th century referents. The sensations that reenactors feel in doing so—of the body as mechanical part, the camaraderie of common purpose, the unity of action, humanity as machine—seem to comingle text and body, the indexical connection to the past created as these contemporary people collectively follow old directions. Reenactors often describe experiencing the strong and yet puzzling sensation of what performance scholars call “dual consciousness” as they perform, part here and now and part in an imagined body of the past. In the terms of performance scholar Rebecca



A man who appears to be a South Vietnamese soldier in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, allies to the United States in the Vietnam War.



An interview with a man who appears to be a U.S. soldier in Vietnam. It is the first interview in the film, which has otherwise to this point remained observational, with no acknowledgement of the body behind the camera.



A red truck driving past several of the reenactors waving by the side of the road. We as an audience now know that we've been misled up to this point by the filmmakers, and that we are not actually in Vietnam in the 1970s.

Scneider (2009), “times touch” through the body’s performative citations. For me, such moments provoked abiding questions about the nature of connection, discovery, and the ethics of historical understanding—core concerns of documentary theory—rather than answers about what past lives were like. While the rest of this article is not about my own experience as a reenactor, I inevitably draw upon those insights and experiences in analyzing the filming and reenacting of the Vietnam War in *In Country*.

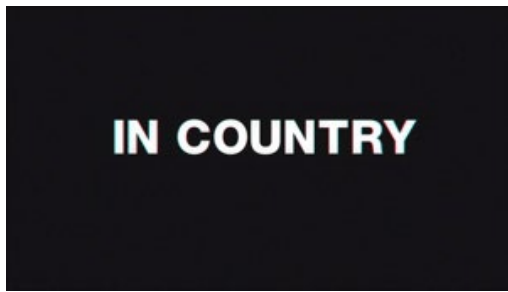
To touch back on the theoretical argument sketched above, the production process behind *In Country* exposed a shortcoming in a notion of indexicality rooted so firmly in technology and the image. While filmmakers Attie and O’Hara used digital technologies to record images and sounds of the reenactment, they somewhat unconsciously followed 1960s and 1970s analog documentary tenets grounded in faith that *the image could represent events*. The directors never considered manipulating frames or shots in post-production beyond basic editing and color correction. Yet the subject of the film itself is already a step removed from representation, already an image of war shorn of fear and death and built to feel cinematic.

The material connection between the image with stakes and its subject, in other words, was “degraded” before Attie even turned his digital camera on. The purported loss of indexicality has nothing to do with the digital or analog image itself. However, the U.S. men featured in the film—like the Redcoat reenactors with whom I participated—*do* aim for indexical “touch” with the past through their documentary method of choice, shared reenactment performance.

Synopsis of *In Country*

In Country follows the story of a group of men from Oregon who reenact battles from the Vietnam War, but the opening five minutes of the film do not foreshadow the unfolding of this story. We are instead led to believe that we are watching an observational film about soldiers five years into the Vietnam War itself who are about to undertake a deadly mission. A somewhat insecure and informally dressed officer under a tent rallies a group of ten or so U.S. soldiers, and then a unit leader debriefs his men on the plan to destroy weapons caches in a lightly patrolled “VC area.” High strings in the background cue us to potential dangers as we see the men wade across the river in water up to their thighs, step through the brush with weapons drawn, and spot an enemy encampment through the leaves by the river. “We came upon their Viet Cong camp,” whispers one soldier into a radio. There is a straight cut to a shot of other U.S. soldiers hiding by a nearby road, who copy the message.

One whispers to the camera that he’s relatively old at twenty-four and doing his second tour with “no end in sight.” The eerie soundscape fades out, and the film tips its hat as being of reenactment and anachronism rather than Vietnam. The soldier we just heard waves at a large, modern red truck with a dog in the flatbed as it rolls by their position. An ironic, 60s slide-show-style title-card reading “IN COUNTRY” comes on screen set to the opening of Count Five’s classic 1966 rock track “Psychotic Reaction.” The ensuing music montage juxtaposes archival footage of army basic training in the late 1960s with shots of the reenactors preparing their props and food for the reenactment. This dynamic introduces a key mechanism for advancing the narrative through the rest of the film, which employs archival footage as markers of the past that remain in the present. But the moment for affectively dropping film viewers into the world of Vietnam has now passed. All subsequent footage of these characters dressed in 1960s army garb reads as documenting performance rather than events of war. In some respects, this opening “fiction” is the only moment in the film in which the viewer sees the environment as the reenactors attempt to experience it through their



The opening title, itself a citation of 1960s and 1970s military slide design.



Archival footage of basic training with U.S. soldiers prior to deployment to Vietnam in the 1960s or 1970s. This footage does not have obvious date markers.

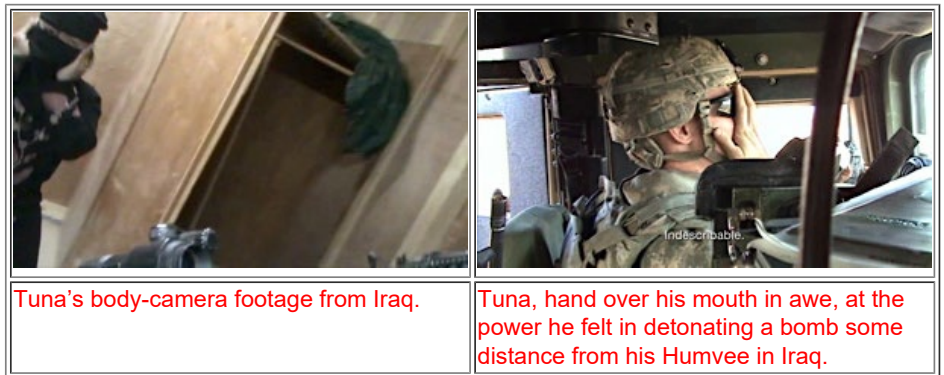


One reenactor spray-painting a tin can black in preparation for the reenactment event, clearly meant to draw a parallel to the pre-production of 1960s war that we have just seen.



roleplay.

The narrative structure centers on a single reenactment that takes place over a weekend in Oregon, but the film from this point on draws from a variety of sources for footage. Scenes made from footage of other times and places spin out from the storyline of the reenactment almost like memories triggered unexpectedly from details in the performance. Seven sequences of archival clips of journalists' and filmmakers' 16 mm films of U.S. soldiers in training and Vietnam during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which depict actual death, suffering, and malaise, function as complex affective and visual points of comparison to the reenactment. In some cases, they seem to stand in directly for the memories one or another reenactor who undertakes a similar task in the reenactment. Interviews with the reenactors focus on why they participate in the hobby as well as personal reflections on war and reintegration into civilian life. We also see observational footage of reenactors' everyday lives with families, friends, and contemporary military units, and "home movie" footage of several reenactors' deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.



Tuna's body-camera footage from Iraq.

Tuna, hand over his mouth in awe, at the power he felt in detonating a bomb some distance from his Humvee in Iraq.

As the film unfolds, the ensemble of reenactors reveals more intimate details about their lives and histories with war outside of the reenactment. We tour the home of Joel Kinney, a Vietnam War memorabilia collector fascinated by the affective powers of the aroma of "bug juice," slang for the plastic bottles of DDT-laced insect repellant issued to U.S. soldiers during the war, to compel veterans' psychic returns to tours in Vietnam. We see Iraq War army veteran Charles "Tuna" Ford playing soldier with his small children in the grass of a fenced suburban backyard. In an interview, he recalls wanting to join the army as a high schooler for "carrying a gun, having authority, and doing the cool guy stuff," and the film then cuts to footage he recorded on a body camera while raiding a house in Iraq. We also see footage of him detonating a bomb in the Iraqi desert from the driver's seat of a Humvee, an experience of power he characterizes as "fucking tight" and then "indescribable" to his comrade behind the camera. We hear the reflections of South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) reenactor named Vinh Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American who fought for the ARVN with the U.S. military in the 1960s and then immigrated to Oregon after the war. He says that he reenacts to "revisit the image of what I was in the past." We meet a participant named Hayden "Bummy" Baumgartner who fought in Vietnam as a young man in 1970-1 and reenacts "to go back" and serve as an advisor to the group on uniform authenticity. A reenactor named Lucien "Doc" Darensburg served as a medic during the Iraq War, and talks on camera about soldierly camaraderie and the difficulties of transitioning back to civilian life and coping with PTSD. Matt Kinney, the manager of a Portland brewery who has no affiliation with the contemporary military, reenacts to live out "that childhood love of playing war in the woods." And a high school student named David "Cricket" Safina-Massey speaks on camera about how he has enlisted to join the Marines once he turns eighteen. M. Kinney and Cricket serve as foils to reenactors with past military

Reenactor Joel Kinney demonstrates during an interview the expression he sees on the faces of Vietnam veterans when they smell a container of “bug juice” he has on hand in his memorabilia room.



Charles “Tuna” Ford plays soldier with his children while at home. This frame sets up and provides a point of contrast for subsequent scenes gleaned from Tuna’s “home movies” of deployments in Iraq and then Afghanistan.



Vinh Nguyen, a former ARVN soldier who reenacts in some respects as his former self.

experience and soldiers pictured in archival footage in Vietnam.



Hayden “Bummy” Baumgartner, a Vietnam veteran who participates in the reenactment, seen here advising younger members of the group on how to improve the authenticity of their appearance.



Lucien “Doc” Darensburg, a former army medic participating at the time of the filming in his first reenactment.



Matt Kinney, a brewer from Portland, Oregon. At the time of the filming, he had not served in the military, and two sections of the film portray him as relatively inexperienced and somewhat naïve in comparison to the other reenactors.



David “Cricket” Safina-Massey, a high school student who has already enlisted to join the Marines. In his most commented-upon appearance in the film, which I analyze at length later in the article, he describes the realness of the reenactment compared to the Boy Scouts.

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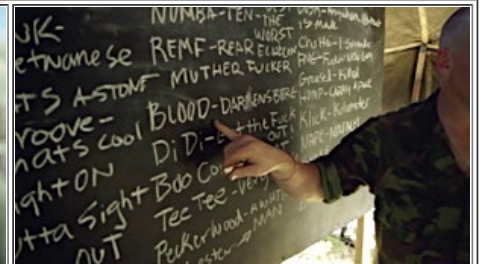
JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Performative citations of 1960s songs, Vietnam War movies, historical footage, and training manual details recur in interactions among these men as they prepare their uniforms and gear and then perform in the reenactment itself.



One reenactor's helmet inscribed in bubble letters with the phrase "Sock It to Me." Many soldiers wrote such messages on their helmets during the Vietnam War, and it has become a stock feature in Hollywood Vietnam War films. And now this one, too.



Joel Kinney delivers a lecture about the "proper" terminology to use while reenacting as Vietnam War soldiers.

When Nguyen arrives at the encampment, for example, he and Joel Kinney exchange bear hugs and the exuberant salutation "Good morning, Vietnam!" a joking reference to Nguyen's ethnicity as well as the eponymous 1987 movie starring Robin Williams as a comedic, irreverent Armed Forces radio host during the Vietnam War. Other soldiers decorate their helmets with designs, flowers, and slogans reminiscent of the conflicted characters in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), a dystopian farce about the inadequacy of military training to aid a doomed unit of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam. One reenactor wrote "Sock It To Me" in bubble letters on the back of his helmet, a term with such a convoluted history in popular culture that it is difficult to pin down the referent here for what seems to be a self-reflexive critique of the war and the soldier's reluctant, enforced place in executing it.[9] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) J. Kinney teaches unsettling Vietnam era slang to the other reenactors through occasional references to fiction films. He encourages fellow reenactors to use the terms "zapped" for killed, "Dink" for Vietnamese, "peckerwood" for white man, "nape" for napalm, and "titi, which you've seen in *Full Metal Jacket*," for "very little." The first night under the tent, the group screens *Easy Rider* (1969) together while smoking cigarettes.



Two reenactors who play the Vietcong. We learn practically nothing about these men, or any others who may reenact along with them.



On the second day, the reenactors patrol the woods and participate in brief gunfights with the VC, played by several men dressed in black sweatsuits. The patrol, gunfights, and simulated death segue to deeper vignettes with the reenactors. Tuna describes difficulties reconnecting with his wife and children after returning from Iraq, and discloses that he will soon deploy to Afghanistan for a year. The unit of reenactors sees him off. Doc reflects on nightmares and the dead bodies he saw in Iraq as he carries a reenactor "Killed In Action" to a checkpoint, a scene I will analyze in greater detail below. The combining of footage from Vietnam, Iraq, and the reenactment proceeds more seamlessly and efficiently at this point in the film. When Nguyen captures two reenactors playing the Vietcong, for instance, a close up on his face cuts to a brief montage of armed ARVN soldiers standing uncertainly over presumed communist enemies in Vietnamese villages. The return to Nguyen's close up in the reenactment leads the shots to read as something like a sequence of unbidden memories.



Nguyen “captures” two reenactors who role-play the Vietcong. The subsequent montage shows ARVN soldiers pointing guns at Vietnamese villagers, soldiers, or guerrillas. This section is brief, and the image returns to the shot of Nguyen at the reenactment, giving the impression that we have just seen his thoughts. The construction of this scene (character, shots from another time and place, return to character) often connotes a turn to thoughts or dreams in Hollywood films. Attie and O’Hara make use of a familiar trope of fiction filmmaking here.



When it starts to rain at the reenactment by the evening of the second day, Nguyen’s subtitled voiceover in Vietnamese validates this interpretation. The sound of raindrops on a poncho reminds Nguyen of a moment of acute vulnerability during the Vietnam War, and he confesses to crying at the reenactment because he is overwhelmed by the rush of memories. Portland brewer M. Kinney, by contrast, revels in the rush of mock killing, blisters on his feet, and mild delirium induced by his lack of sleep. Bummy and Doc reflect on the impossibility of forgetting the things they’ve seen at war and discuss limitations they face in developing deep interpersonal relationships as civilians. The reenactment weekend concludes in the rain with the reenactors sharing a beer together back at the camp. The film ends with Tuna’s return home from Afghanistan to his family, and the unit of reenactors marching together in a small-town parade as a small boy in camouflage fatigues looks on.

When simulating “being there” falls flat: the process of making *In Country*



The last shot in the final scene, a parade in which all the reenactors enjoy a reunion after Tuna returns from Afghanistan. The shot features this young, anonymous boy in fatigues, presumably looking admirably at a future trajectory in the military. O’Hara spoke in an interview with me about this shot serving as the filmmakers’ subtle antiwar statement.

The makers of *In Country* began production in a way recognizable to practitioners of observational and participatory cinema forms. Once they secured access to subjects, Attie and O’Hara went to film them up close, waiting with camera and sound rolling to be surprised by unexpected contingencies or moments of surprising revelation. They would occasionally ask their subjects questions, but not so as to disrupt the flow of ongoing activity. From this material, they would distill moments in which stakes, motives, and human spirit shone through, and then structure the film for these hard-won discoveries to lead the audience to an enriched understanding of the subculture of war reenactment.

In practice, this entailed much literal and metaphorical walking in the woods—a fact reflected in the finished film. *In Country* dedicates a good deal of screen time to shots of the reenactors toting replica (or perhaps actual) M-16s loaded with blanks and patrolling the Oregon foliage, a routine that seems to offer little in the way of filmable stakes until the interruption of a mock gun battle. Attie filmed these patrols in anticipation of such a cinematic conflict, and the reenactment obliged. I look at this moment here because the aesthetics of the scene reveal peculiar tensions entailed in “being there” to document the reenactment of events like those once filmed.

The scene occurs about an hour into the documentary, when the filmmakers and their subjects are “ambushed” by several other reenactors playing the Vietcong. At the sound of gunshots—an unscripted event that cameraman Attie was nonetheless hoping and expecting to happen—the image on screen seems to lose





Cameraman Mike Attie diving into the weeds when he and the reenactors he records are "ambushed."

its mooring to the cameraperson's eye. The moment in the performance and the record of this moment that we film viewers see here touch precedent events in complex ways. Perhaps the reenactors on screen suddenly imagine being in a firefight Vietnam, or perhaps audience members watching the finished film think back to viewing "embedded reporting" of battles in Iraq or the fictionalized helter-skelter camerawork employed in the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Perhaps it's some of both. We viewers see the camerawork here transition from a handheld, but controlled following shot of subjects in front of the lens to the movement record of the cameraperson himself ducking into the weeds by the side of the road, not visibly focused, momentarily, on anything in particular in front of the lens. The referent for the camerawork is unstable, a "severed index," in Schneider's terms, like the prosthetic index finger in the grass pointing nowhere in particular that she stumbled upon with a surge of horror and then delight at a Civil War reenactment. She then photographed the faux-finger for the cover of her book.

Attie, the observational cameraperson diving into the weeds, knew that he was not in real danger. This is perhaps an obvious point, but it is nonetheless a significant one. Shooting amid the grass was one choice among many at Attie's disposal. He could have rushed into the trees to catch a few shots of the opposing army, or moved around to the front of his subjects so as to record their faces instead of settling for plants and backs. We might think of the camerawork as a kind of "unprivileged camera style," to use ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall's (1998) phrase for a camera that attempts to mimic the perceptual and cultural sensibility of the subjects (200). Attie's rationale for the choice he made indeed seemed to express something like this logic. As he put it,

"When you're shooting, you want to be respectful of the event and also to some extent playing along, and that's the part of the war correspondent. You know you want to keep cover, you want to lay low because I think it would ruin it for them if I was standing up getting the ideal angle of the firefight" (Attie).

Perhaps in diving down into the grass, Attie was being a good reenactor, a way of being that direct cinema and observational cinema practitioners have long resisted, if not reviled as anathema to the serendipitous, immediate, spontaneous phenomena that the skillfully wielded camera could reveal when rolling amidst everyday life. Direct cinema pioneer Ricky Leacock famously compared the cameraperson recording everyday life to the voltmeter measuring electrical current: "you design your voltmeter so that very little goes through it," he said. Leacock's ideal cameraperson was co-present with subjects but barely there as a being, concentrating on framing, exposure, focus, and reacting with camera-body to live events in their unfolding. He said of this,

"We say we are filmmakers, but in a funny sort of way *we are the audience*. We do not have the burden of a director" (Blue, 409).

Since Attie and O'Hara, paradoxically, *had to act* in order to shoot the reenactment according to observational tenets (proximity to subjects, following rather than directing activities, and accepting everyday activities as events to record), their bodily orientations are at odds with Leacock's theory of the observational cameraperson as audience member. "During the event, we were totally immersed in their fantasy world," O'Hara and Attie wrote in an online article about the process of making the film for *The Daily Beast*.

"At certain moments they even talked to us as if we were actually

reporters from the 1970s. When we were outside in the field, we didn't ask them about their real lives. We reserved questions about their home life and experiences in Iraq for after the reenactment was finished in order to stay in character and fully inhabit their fantasy."

The direct cinema goal of simulating "being there" is nonetheless the first that the *In Country* filmmakers have claimed in interviews with me and with others about what they hoped to do with the film. Stated O'Hara, echoing Leacock and more recent proponents of sensory documentary styles:

"I think we tried to give people watching the film the experience we had being there, as best we could, and used all these cinematic techniques that try to give people that feeling" (O'Hara).

I do not think this self-assessment accurately describes how Attie and O'Hara ended up making the film in practice, but paying homage to the value of "being there" has a long history in documentary filmmaking. The rhetoric of "being there" is connected to ideas about camerawork and the significance of direct, physically proximate access to subjects doing things. "Being there" has meant filming in such a way that the viewers of the footage would feel as though *in the presence* of events that unfold on screen, experiencing them from the perspective of the cameraperson who once recorded these shots live and co-present amid film subjects. The camera's mechanical, indexical nature, in this line of thinking, would allow the unplanned footage to store up and then re-present surprising and organic details about the actual world that was once in front of the lens, revealing clues about the textures of landscapes and subjects' lives for viewers to discover and consider on their own. Viewers are taken to be partners in thinking rather than passive recipients of cinematic messaging. And so attendant to this way of approaching documentary is the idea that the film should follow subjects whither they go, even into the weeds of everyday minutiae, while downplaying the political views of the filmmakers themselves. Attie and O'Hara say they share an affinity with this epistemological orientation. In an interview with me, O'Hara recounted one of their "founding myths as film collaborators" in these terms:

"It's not that either one of us don't care about films that could change the world, obviously, but I said to [Mike], I was like, you're so clearly not in this camp of people trying to make lasting change through a film, and he was like, yeah, well, I don't feel like I know the answer."

The problem with this notion of "being there" with its presumption of humility and neutrality, as Trinh T. Minh ha (1993), Brian Winston (1993), Michael Renov (2004), Fatimah Tobing-Rony (1996), Jill Godmilow (2002) and many others have pointed out, is that it occludes choices and socio-historical forces: the choice to focus on a war reenactment instead of a more urgent subject—or even those reenactors who play the Vietcong. There was the need for two young filmmakers seeking academic jobs in a tough market to produce a cinematic feature documentary quickly and cheaply, and the fact that the reenactment offered ready-made production value, aesthetics of the outdoors, the hot-button theme of masculine vulnerability, and the "sexiness of the Vietnam War," in O'Hara's terms (O'Hara). A key tenet of critical race and gender theory holds that claims to neutrality often rationalize the norms of power in practice, like the tacit (and sometimes explicit) racism, sexism, and nationalism that creeps into war reenactments under the banner of historical realism. To follow and record such subjects as a means to understand them teeters close to simply projecting their values when the records find their way into a finished, edited film.

Such forces and others further trouble Leacock's voltmeter analogy, and the attendant discourse about allowing the audience to "be there" to think about *this* and not *that* for themselves. Furthermore, there are limitations with

observational filmmaking methods that practitioner-theorists acknowledge. Observational camerawork cannot reveal much about the psyche or intimate activities. Theorist-filmmakers in anthropology like Lucien Castaing-Taylor (1998) and Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz (2009) have simply argued that neither reenactment nor autobiography are as trustworthy as voltmeterish observation of everyday life in its unfolding. These filmmakers have claimed that sensory nonfiction films offer up significant, underexplored ways to create research about everyday life, cognition, time, and affect within the disciplines of anthropology and art. But the films produced by this school—to much critical acclaim and influence in their corner of academia[10]—have thus far generally embraced noninterventionist and realist traditions of camerawork, rooted in observational or gently participatory methods. Experiments with wearable and miniature camera aesthetics like *Leviathan* (2012), an austere feature pieced together from footage recorded by cameras ensconced on the bodies, masts, walls, and ropes of a New England fishing boat and crew amid a sea voyage, expand on observational cinema commitments to nonintervention, long takes, and the rejection of music, voiceover, and interview even though the camera's view is not aligned directly with the cameraperson's viewing eye. It is not a film that addresses critiques about power dynamics leveled at the observational mode and its fascination with staying in the weeds.

For the filmmakers of *In Country* who recorded reenactors, however, observation alone was not permitted, and they found that their approximation of observational camerawork “felt pretty flat” in their first assembly screening, in Attie's terms. Somehow, he reflected, “you never really had a sense about what Vietnam was” (Attie). Reenacting the Vietnam War in the Oregon woods may offer cinematic capital in the form of outdoor aesthetics, controversy, and eccentricity, but the stakes of reenacting are in many cases internal to individual reenactors, or invisibly and intersubjectively present in the space between performers who share desires for connection with a lived past and commit themselves to discover something ineffable. The observational camera can't see these spaces. And there is no organic “crisis structure” to follow that might allow a documentary to graft off this trope of Hollywood narrative structure, as in the direct cinema films of Robert Drew.[11] At the end of their shooting and first major round of editing, Attie and O'Hara worried that they had instead fallen for the illusion of reenactment, or the allure of simulation. They had a film about costumed men with replica guns walking in the woods, who then returned to their regular jobs. Notions of indexicality as mechanically reproduced photographic image inscribed on film or chip had led their documentary to a dead end.

But reenacting “being there” as Vietnam era journalists offered an unusual indexical possibility to the makers of *In Country*. It was almost as if by accident and through the coincidence of a shared ethic of camerawork with 1970s filmers of war—a shared “rolling gait,” if not exactly the same analog film rolling through the same kind of gate—their footage bore the potential to touch something of the past lingering in the present. This was touch not by the cameraperson's image, but by the cameraperson's unconsciously reenacted *practices* of recording.

Internalizing the archive: the real of reenacted camerawork

Several years into producing the film, Attie and O'Hara realized that they could cut relatively easily between their own footage of the reenactment and archival footage recorded in Vietnam. A scene early on in the film demonstrated the potential power of this technique for recasting their “flat” reenactment footage. The reenactors are on patrol, and no firefight has yet happened. There is a sequence of shots of walking and waiting in the woods of Oregon. One reenactor,



A reenactor placing a flower in his helmet, enacting the spirit of the late 1960s.



Across the transition from the Oregon woods to archival footage in Vietnam.



Juxtaposition of archival footage of an M-18 Claymore mine actually wired and set in Vietnam with one carried by a reenactor in Oregon without wires protruding. It is the juxtaposition of these two very similar looking shots across 40+ years that begins to bring viewers back to the present, now with the gravitas of the actual war in mind.

echoing 1968, places a daisy in his helmet. We, with the reenactors, are waiting, passing time in private spaces for reflection on and performance of a pastiche of history, popular culture, and escape from workplace routines. The montage ends with a profile close up of a soldier smoking a cigarette, subtly different from the previous shots in the sequence. The foliage in the background is different, the colors are softer, and the image is grainier. Then comes an aerial shot, more or less following the logic and rhythm of the spatial montage as though we are seeing the terrain in the same area at the same time only now from above. But the texture of the footage feels as though from another world. It is no longer the crisp HD video, and we quickly see that the verdant rice fields below are not the Oregon woods. We are looking at archival footage of rural Vietnam, shot from a helicopter, we presume, sometime during the Vietnam War. The disjuncture between the observational recording and editing style, and the self-conscious temporal rupture across this cut infuses the sequence with weight, difference, and stakes. *This* is Vietnam. The being there of these shots is that of the war correspondents of the 1960s or 1970s, re-appropriated in the editing room by contemporary filmmakers who had roleplayed as those correspondents and found their own footage of reenactors lacking. But because our entry point to the archival footage is *through* the contemporary reenactors behind and in front of the camera, we are primed to understand both their performance activities and the shots we are about to see as nodes along an ongoing continuum of time, a continuum we now enter as spectators of the film.

Beneath several further aerial shots of mountains, fields, and helicopters, we hear a soldier read a letter home about arriving in Vietnam amid a lightning storm. The helicopter lands, and we find ourselves with soldiers on the ground. We see an edited sequence of various U.S. soldiers walking through the landscape, finding a skull on a wooden post, and hacking through the bush, accompanied by audio recordings of U.S. soldiers talking or reading for the camera. Two soldiers carry a shirtless man between them who appears to have fainted. “I can’t walk through that kind of stuff all day,” says a voice. The image cuts to a ¾ shot of a different man lying on the ground, awake but dazed, and the cameraperson zooms in to an extreme close up of his face as a cold, off-screen male voice, presumably the journalist, asks, “What does it do to you?” The soldier responds, “Well, try to name something it doesn’t do to you. . . . Just can’t hack that stuff all day.” Another soldier voice reads a litany of uncomfortable sensations, “the heat, the stench of the air, the sick feeling in your stomach day after day, the smell of body odor and the choking dust in your throat,” as the montage on screen illustrates still more everyday difficulties. Soldiers walk through the bush and past the camera, each shot taken at a different time in a different place and featuring a different face. A wide shot shows a soldier in the middle of a stream, water up to his neck, holding his rifle above his head as he crosses—a point of reference for an early shot in the film of the reenactors wading across a river. A soldier waits as the sound of gunshots drones faintly in the distance, off screen. Then there is an interview with a soldier featured in the 1970 CBS television documentary, *The World of Charlie Company*. “It’s like pure hell,” he starts.

“I mean, like a lot of guys they hunted back in the world before they come over here. They come over here, they stay out anywhere from eighteen [days] to a month. Bugs biting on us, crawling all over us. You sleep on the ground, and you know, you’re humping all day long. A lot of guys, you know, they change opinion about being out in the woods. A lot of guys say if they go back to the world they won’t go out in the woods for anything, hunting or any other reason.”



U.S. soldiers in Vietnam fording a stream, and the reenactors in the Oregon woods doing the same on their first day of the reenactment.



As the soldier speaks, we see a montage that loosely illustrates what he is saying, soldiers slapping bugs, lying on the ground, hiking, and rustling in bushes as the talking ends. It appears that the soldiers are setting up an M 18 claymore anti-personnel mine that reads “FRONT TOWARD ENEMY.” We see a close up of the mine on the ground, wires protruding in several directions from its top. Then there is a straight cut to a claymore mine in the hand of a reenactor in Oregon, close to identical to the one featured in the previous shot but crisper in the HD footage, and sans wiring.

If we miss this detail, we still quickly catch on that we’re back in Oregon. The reenactors are going about activities of their own in the woods, digging foxholes and relaxing in hammocks. But we as the audience understand what they are doing differently now. We have been transported elsewhere and elsewhere by the footage of Vietnam, where the proximity of death is palpable and the circumstances are grave.

We might read into the reenactors’ activity here something like the “virtual gaze” in reverse, to adapt Friedberg’s term for the early cinema viewer. Friedberg argued that cinema spectatorship developed to meet the emergent structures of desire of the flaneur and the flaneuse, urbanites who strolled through shopping districts as a form of ocular pleasure. Walking through a city and taking in new window displays of far-flung, mass-produced commodities led urbanites to develop over time a growing desire for novel, pleasurable leisure experiences and an appetite for visual display. The cinema, for Friedberg, was more an extension of the “mobile gaze” of shopping than the realism of renaissance painting or the objectivity of scientific instruments. The “virtual gaze” they brought to bear on cinematic records of exotic locales, close ups, and movement allowed spectators to read the world as a window display offering novel affective delights and tools for the imagination.

We might imagine the filmmakers of *In Country*—and perhaps of filmmakers who employ observational methods more broadly—taking up the set of sensibilities that Friedberg lays out to turn everyday life into a palette of visual delights. With *In Country*, the archive expands in time and scope immeasurably, with instant access to footage taken over 50 years ago through online video platforms like YouTube. The virtual gaze is also virtually mobile, traversing time and space. With over 120 years of film and video footage available for reuse, the exercise of editing across different times is easier now than in times past, albeit incredibly labor intensive. And the reenactors themselves undertake the activity of media-informed walking as a pleasurable cinematic experience, a way to get at the experience of Vietnam. Friedberg’s shopping mall reimagined as the woods of Oregon offer up a host of grisly surprises, startling echoes of horrific events of the past that charge the present in complicated ways, as with the scene unfolding in Oregon.

As the high schooler Cricket finishes his foxhole, the offscreen voice of O’Hara says, “You told me yesterday that this was one of the better experiences of your life. Do you still feel that way?” He responds, “Yeah, for sure,” as a lower third identifies him as “David ‘Cricket’ Safina-Massey, High School Student.” O’Hara asks him to explain what he likes about it.

“I don’t know. It’s real. You have to work to get it done. It’s not like Boy Scouts where everything’s like, oh, you know. This is how it would be if it were actually real. Stuff actually happens. But yeah. This is perfect.”

He then discloses that he has enlisted in the Marines, which he will join after graduating from high school the next spring.

Suggestions of the hardships faced by U.S. soldiers who actually served in Vietnam. These images blend with voice recordings of soldiers who read letters that they wrote home, or speak to journalists there with them.



A soldier in Vietnam featured in the 1970 CBS documentary *The World of Charlie Company* describes he and his unit's experience as "pure hell."

Cricket in this moment in the context of the film embodies the figure of the naïve young man who envisions military service as the route to authentic masculinity, only tested thus far in the sensory real of reenactment. Variations of this coming-of-age theme have played out in many U.S. cultural narratives from novels like *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) to policy documents like *The Moynihan Report* of the 1960s to films like *The Hurt Locker* (2008) in the midst of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. There is a great deal of symbolic poignancy in the reenactment of this theme here, primed as we are by the archival snippets of soldier experiences from Vietnam. There is a scary reality to contemplate about the effects of simulation in Cricket's underexplored conviction of reality in reenactment—at least compared to the Boy Scouts—and in his future trajectory as a Marine, where we imagine him if unlucky finding his own way to a "pure hell" that might make these Oregon woods anathema should he return. At his luckiest, he has still signed up to be an executor of U.S. imperialism.

Little of this scene, to return to the central argument about indexicality in documentary, stands on the observational footage alone. Cricket only speaks once O'Hara asks him a question, her dual roles as filmmaker of reenactment and reenactor of 1960s journalist converging. And the significance of Cricket's understanding the real as a combination of moderate physical labor, imagination, and camaraderie with other reenactors stands out mostly because of the carefully crafted accumulation of archived sensory details from the Vietnam footage that preceded it. Vietnam plays in those thick instances as its mythology rather than through the particularity of a unit's experiences. The anonymous soldiers on screen stand in for the quagmire of Vietnam, and the existential crisis the war posed to prevailing ideas about the virtues of loyalty and patriotism. In the re-appropriation of the archival footage, Attie and O'Hara frame the Vietnam War as historical and mythic. Their editing breaks up the close-to-the-ground reportage of 1960s journalists in order to emphasize affect, fragmentation, and lyricism in the soldiers' brushes with death.

In this way, *In Country's* treatment of the unit of reenactors with names and individual personalities is at odds with the film's use of archival footage from Vietnam, in which social types and tropes rather than individuals emerge. [12] The shots from the archival footage accumulate in density, but do not progress. The Vietnam-era soldiers grope for meaning and purpose amid the physical discomforts of their everyday lives. They stand in stark contrast to Cricket and the account he offers about pursuing the real. It is a juxtaposition that allows this moment of the film to communicate an anti-war politics that might rather have read as farce without the context provided by the archival footage from Vietnam.



Cricket speaking to O'Hara, just off camera to the right of the frame, in a scene that blends elements of reenacting the past with a projection onto the future. Cricket will be joining the Marines after he graduates from high school, he says.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

I want to speculate a bit more on Cricket's sense of the real here and its relevance for theorizing documentary. It is important to take such strongly felt and expressed ideas about the real seriously, even or especially when they appear to be dangerous. Cricket is away from home for the reenactment, spending time with a number of men who have actually served in the armed forces. These veterans have complex views of their war experiences, but in general express pride in their service and the ethos it represents. At moments, they seem to use their time reenacting to work through difficult memories of war together.

They all encourage Cricket to pursue his own adventure in the military, and treat him as "one of the guys" during their reenactments. Cricket compares the real of reenactment to the real of the Boy Scouts, where, presumably, someone else dug the holes and pitched the tents. At least in reenacting, he seems to say, he is responsible for his own space and gear the way an actual soldier (or adult) would be. The real for Cricket seems to be an arena of experience in which he can test his own masculinity relative to his own prior experiences, and imagine connections to other men whom have survived difficulty and killed for country. There is a satisfying wholeness, he seems to imply, to the immersion in the performance of war, a kind of documentary connection felt as he follows the scripts and routines of Vietnam era soldiers who also performed these duties in different circumstances.

The actions and the props catalyze feeling and thinking about the reality of historical war experience that cannot be known, a sublime sensation of doubleness in the body. The reenactor is simultaneously an imagined warrior of the past and the self in the present playing the role. The feeling of real connection to the particular but unknowable past that Cricket plays further melds to his own future identity as a Marine. In a very real sense, by taking responsibility for making his body the echo of a Vietnam era soldier through details gleaned from training manuals, war materiel, documentary films, history books, and Hollywood Vietnam films alike, Cricket becomes a living document of the Vietnam War for the long duration, cinematic documentary he "observes" in his head as he and the other reenactors play out their scenario over the weekend. But for audiences of the documentary *In Country*, there is not much of this to see, and many viewers will not have the level of investment in the Vietnam War that could suffuse shots of the reenactment itself with the aura of the real.

Attie and O'Hara did not anticipate using archival footage to make their film, but they found the observational material of just the reenactment unsatisfying. O'Hara said "We thought the reenactment would be a little more self-sufficient than it was, if you could take [viewers] there you'd see all the layers that we were seeing" (O'Hara). It was only after making a full cut of their observational film that they thought to enfold archival footage into select reenactment scenes. Found details like the two M18 claymore mines that abut each other in the editing serve to stitch together the asynchronous times with familiar editing conventions to denote continuity, while also calling attention to differences between the present and the past. Attie and O'Hara struggled to find the language to describe this editing structure and its effects, settling on the term "double helix." I want to suggest two ways to read the layers of time co-present in *In Country*.

One way to read the scene is through Baron's writing on the "archive effect," and the reception-centered notion of the archival object. The documentary draws its

authority, in this reading, from appropriating the archived filmic traces of a past war for different ends. The testimonies of soldiers carry the power of immediacy rediscovered in the present, tacitly drawing social authority from the institutions that have deemed these artifacts and not others worthy of preservation. The film then expresses, in Baron's take, the "authority that adheres to the archival document as evidence." In the scene described above, the afterimage of Vietnam on film serves as a grounding reference point as we hear Cricket talk about the reality of simulated war and his enlistment.

In returning to the notions of reenactment and touch, I want to offer a second layer to this reading of archival footage. If we are capable of internalizing the content and form of media through viewing experiences, as Sobchack (1992) suggested, then we might read the footage itself as a kind of psychic trace of the reenactors within the "film body." They have all seen these archival films, too, after all, and drawn from the evidence they can glean there to craft their reenactment. The lived practice of reenactment starts with the visual evidence of Vietnam, and then translates the films and photographs into a sensory domain in which their bodies serve as documentary media for practices they once saw or read about to become *felt*. The reenactors, in many respects, occupy the position of spectators to documentaries that aim to present "being there." It is in part the labor of finding these artifacts, of internalizing documentaries and popular fiction films about Vietnam, which enables the reenactment to carry affective, auratic meaning for the reenactors like Cricket. The archival clips of past wars charge the walking and waiting in the Oregon woods with an aura that neither archival footage nor shots of reenactment could have singly. It is the intersubjective interplay across times and bodies that comes to *index something* in the present of the screening, an otherwise invisible structure of time. O'Hara's reflections on their use of archival footage corroborate this concern. She explained to me,

"We decided to make a film that only existed in the present tense. We did think a lot about how it was a way in which to say all this history exists in the present moment, like each of these moments has all of those moments kind of built into them."

Imaging so many historical events layered into the present corresponds to the structure of the psyche after traumatic events. For example, Attie and O'Hara edited selected moments from reenactors' Iraq "home movie" clips into a scene featuring "Doc" tending to a reenactor who pretends to have been killed. Shots of Doc bandaging the wounded in Iraq, recording out the window of a Humvee bouncing down the highway, and just hanging out with his unit in the barracks, come to constitute a third temporality in the film, juxtaposed with reenactment shots and loosely parallel events depicted in archival footage from Vietnam. Conjoined with the footage of Iraq, echoes of personally experienced traumatic events emerge as faintly present in particular sections of reenactment footage.



The scene that reuses Doc's footage from Iraq starts with a wide shot of a reenactor lying face down in the Oregon grass, playing dead after a firefight. According to Attie and O'Hara, Doc sprang into action to evacuate the reenactor's body from the "battlefield," radioing in to a nearby "medevac" for a pickup, dragging the reenactor down a long hill, and carrying him over his shoulder to the agreed upon evacuation point. The filmmakers both remembered the moment of recording this scene as notable, and thought of it as a potential core sequence in their film, though they were not thinking of Doc as a character at the time (Attie, O'Hara). It was his first reenactment, O'Hara recalled, and he was somewhat at a loss as to how reenactors typically processed their "dead." So he followed the protocols he had practiced as a medic in Iraq. The process of dragging the living reenactor out of the woods was strenuous and time consuming. It removed him from the action after a long day of hiking through the woods. And when Doc



Juxtapositions across reenactment footage, archival footage from Vietnam, and clips taken by Doc while deployed in Iraq.



Footage of Doc tending a wounded patient in Iraq, recorded by a member of his unit.



Doc dragging a man pretending to have been killed in action down the hill to an evacuation point.



The foggy Humvee ride that Doc (presumably)

finally rested the body on a gurney affixed to the ATV “medevac,” the “dead” reenactor was immediately allowed to come back to life and rejoin his unit.

The pure expenditure of energy in his performance moved Attie and O’Hara, like the echo of a traumatic symptom, to return to this moment time and again as a centerpiece of the film. Later, the filmmakers interviewed Doc for two hours about his experience coming home from the war and coping with PTSD. In the finished scene, we hear his words, carefully edited and languorously paced, as we see shots from Vietnam, the Oregon woods, and Iraq essentially conjoined. It is as if the density of media consumed, experiences remembered, and actions performed that all coexist in Doc’s psyche all the time are here delineated, separated out, and transformed into a duration of cinematic time.

“PTSD is like a weird thing,” Doc says in the voiceover in the midst of the final edited scene. “Some dreams come and go. They come and then they stay for a while and then they go away.” There is a straight cut to a highway in Iraq, recorded handheld from the back of a truck in a convoy. The air is so thick and foggy that only the immediate foreground of the truck and road are visible, evoking in the context of the voice the murkiness of remembered dreams. Doc continues. “I just spark up and have like four nightmares in five days.” There is a cut to a second shot in the same truck in Iraq, dusk now.

“And I’ve had nightmares of all kinds of stuff, where I was dead, dying, shot to pieces, burned, and, like, I can’t do anything. Like, medically, can’t do anything. You know, it’s like, I have my medic bag opened up and there’s nothing in it.”

There is a straight cut to a shot that Doc is recording, a grainy video selfie as he lies down in a cot at night inside barracks. His interview voiceover returns as the video whip-pans from Doc’s face in close up to a wide shot of the room with other soldiers milling about and lying down.

“I’m waking up like covered in sweat, heart beating fast, I don’t even want to go back to sleep. Just in case I was to dream that dream again.”

As the low notes of the score fade in, there is a straight cut back to the reenactment. Doc has begun to drag the body of the reenactor down a hill in the middle of the woods. The camera is at the bottom of the hill looking up toward a bright, circular opening in the trees, and Doc and a second reenactor face away from the camera as they focus on the body. The film allows this event to play at length, with synch sound of rustling bushes and low tones. Doc’s voiceover concludes with a question that the shot of the reenactment seems to offer as an answer. “What can you do about a dream?” For the next minute of the film, Doc strains to pull the body down the hill as Attie and his camera maneuver in the small space so as not to get in his way, zooming in on faces and actions to follow the rhythm of Doc’s effort. It is as though this exertion is the thing that Doc can do about the bad dreams, the reenactment event an opportunity to work through actual traumatic experiences at a close slant to the scenario that he and the other reenactors have constructed for one another.

The logic of the psyche here commandeers the sensory direction of the

recorded while deployed in Iraq. The atmosphere of the space seems to resonate with Doc's reflection on his dreams.

observational footage and the archival material for its own purposes. And we enter a space where the reenactment event on film can have stakes. The stakes have to do with rituals of martial masculinity in U.S. culture, and with survival in an age of biopolitics. The psyche here does not belong to one person. It is an intersubjective entity, perhaps reducible to the psyche of the film body itself. It is the meeting point between the subjects and their years of reflecting on painful lived experiences, the filmmakers centralizing and distilling the poignant thoughts they offer through a production process, and a viewer who connects their own affective responses to these images and sounds to a human source.

Conclusion

In Country is a limit case for thinking about camerawork as a kind of reenactment performance. It's rare that a film literally has camerapersons reenacting as they shoot footage (though pushing such a position explicitly offers an intriguing potential avenue for practitioners). But I want to argue that 1960s style direct cinema and observational camerawork more broadly in digital culture constitutes a reenactment practice. This is not the way that practitioners working within the sensory turn have characterized what they do. Trying to be a "voltmeter," even one who sticks a hand in the frame on occasion, asks the infrequent question, or drops in a line of voiceover about the troubled look of a subject so as to more appropriately disappear, expresses something about a strain of stoicism in 1960s masculinity rather than neutrality.

The long takes in observational cinema are in the contemporary moment the antithesis of voltmeter-ish at the point of reception. They tend to shock or disturb viewers, and I think often in a good way, for forcing them to attend to everyday life imagery in a timescale out of synch with the fast-paced editing typical of digital commercial fare. In this way, watching such a film is like participating in a reenactment. It is long, slow, focused on thick details of lived experience, and it disavows an explicit politics. That kind of camerawork, whose practitioners still tend to see performance, reenactment, and simulation as problems to avoid, produces reenactment effects now. Long takes of pastoral life as received by urban viewers who have no first-hand experience of farming or animal husbandry, such as the forty-five second close up of a sheep chewing its cud at the start of *Sweetgrass* (2008), are performative prior to representational. Like a reenactment, these observational shots conjure temporalities already lost and offer a method to ruminate on details about what such life-worlds might have been like.

In certain screening settings during certain durations of particular films, for particular viewers, the aura of a prior and unfamiliar thought, event, or way of being catalyzes empathy for past human activities and awareness of the structures of power that produce them. These affective jolts occur in the present, not before language and social structure as a whole, but before the individual viewer who feels them can describe the sensation in words. The jolt is an event, in psychoanalytic terms, a rupture in time marked in the psyche by the sensation of the sublime, of being overwhelmed rather than being there. It is the kind of experience that reenactors tend to seek through their performances. It is also the objective of many camerapersons who observe ostensibly mundane events in the present with their cameras, hoping for a jolt of contingency, intimacy, or unpredictability that may equally move the viewers of many future times and places. Indeed, one of the joys of re-screening *cinéma vérité* films resides in these surprising moments. When we see them on screen in the present, we play the part of reenactors who do not move.

When Attie and O'Hara tried to make a film about reenactment by being there to observe it, however, this strategy of 1960s documentarians failed. Their failure

suggests that a society increasingly shaped and suffused by simulations does not reveal itself so well to the observing camera. Rather, in trying to make sense of simulations that nonetheless constitute our world, documentary work seems to demand staging and intervention. As with the Vietnam War reenactment, simulations often already include cinematic imagery and anticipate the presence of the camera. The camera can be enfolded into events that recur—literally in the case of Attie and O’Hara’s roles in the reenactment. The lure of the simulation is visual as well as economic. Attie and O’Hara chose their subject at least in part for time considerations (they committed to shoot a weekend long reenactment and possibly a series of interviews relatively close to home) and their desires to work in academia as nonfiction filmmakers and professors, a life trajectory that demands the production of films.

But the failure of the observational footage to reveal much either about the psychic experiences that drive reenactors or the Vietnam War led them to other strategies. They scoured archival footage and fiction films *much like the reenactors themselves* who put in work to craft their roles and build up their receptivity to the affective power of performing together. Ironically, then, the archival footage Attie and O’Hara incorporated says less about the past than the collective psyche of the present. The archival footage recasts comments and gestures in the records of the reenactment, as with Nguyen’s capture of the Vietcong reenactors or Doc’s unusual effort to extract the reenactor “killed in action,” that viewers of the film otherwise might not have noticed. As they use the reenactment to work through personal traumas of the past, we viewers to the film are invited to imagine coping with experiences of war otherwise difficult to share and impossible to see.

This sensation of the documentary real arises out of what I describe as an *intersubjective indexicality*; it plays out as the materiality of the real that startles. It flashes up at moments in perception and then fades away, but leads the experiencing subject to a sense of connection with the activities of others whom have come before that is deep, driving, and situated. It is limited by the bounds of the thinkable. And these are situated boundaries that we must take seriously as material constraints in digital culture.

Temporality in a reenactment points forward and backward simultaneously. It is not hard to imagine Cricket deployed to serve a current neocolonial war in Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan, Lebanon, Iran, or somewhere else yet to be identified as requiring brutal U.S. civilization. Cricket the reenactor gestures back to other young U.S. men who enlisted to fight in Vietnam, like veteran John Musgrave, a key character in Novick and Burns *The Vietnam War*. He joined the Marines at about the same age as Cricket, and by his own account, did so with about the same level of introspection and expectation. He spoke in the film about wanting adventure, hardship, and patriotic duty. But later in the series, Musgrave delivered a hard-won reflection on the nature of youth, confusion, and racism in war in an elaboration on the formation of his hatred for the enemy:

“I saw a Marine step on a bouncing betty mine, and that’s when I made my deal with the devil. And I said I will never kill another human being as long as I’m in Vietnam. However, I will waste as many gooks as I can find. I’ll wax as many dinks as I can find. I’ll smoke as many zips as I can find. But I ain’t gonna kill anybody. Turn a subject into an object. Racism 101. It turns out to be a very necessary tool when you have children fighting your wars. For them to stay sane doing their work.”

Musgrave’s confession about his linguistic strategy for turning subject into object bears ominously upon Joel Kinney’s eerie presentation of period correct language

to use in the reenactment. This is the language of oppression, and is a flaw of the reenactment and the film about it to fail a harder interrogation of such moments. We are left to wonder whether Cricket in his likely current deployment will find himself reenacting this particular lesson, the deepest and darkest motif in the repertoire of collective U.S. memory.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, Andrew Hall's satirical post "Afghanistan Loves Ken Burns' Vietnam War Documentary" on Patheos.com and an interview with Ken Burns and Lynn Novick in *Mother Jones* by Iraq War veteran Phil Klay, "Ken Burns Never Knew How Wrong He Was About the Vietnam War," where Burns himself addressed the question about lessons learned, the obligations of storytelling, and possible parallels to draw about wars without endings. "Our job is just to tell the story, not to put up big neon signs saying, 'Hey, isn't this kind of like the present?' But we know historical narratives cannot help but be informed by our own fears and desires. The tactics the Viet Cong and also the North Vietnamese Army employed, as well as the Taliban and Al Qaeda and now ISIS, suggest an infinite war—and that's why you hope that lessons of Vietnam can be distilled." [\[return to page 1\]](#)
2. Central to observational recording methods is the idea that the cameraperson should mostly disappear as a body so as to focus energy and attention on events to which they are present. It is a strategy for storing up "being there" for a future audience to experience, a point I discuss at length below.
3. I would like to acknowledge Stella Bruzzi's *New Documentary* (2006) here for introducing Judith Butler's concept of the performative to the field through an analysis of first person documentary films that follow a character playing a part, like Nick Broomfield's scandal hunter persona. She also considers films by Nicholas Barker and Molly Dineen. [\[return to page 2\]](#)
4. Peirce wrote incisively about this phenomenon of perception in relation to a scientist working in a lab. Anticipating by seventy years Steve Woolgar and Bruno Latour's argument in *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979) about the tacit cultural entanglements embedded within the processes of producing "scientific" knowledge, Pierce observed that the scientist "has had his mind moulded by his life in the laboratory to a degree that is little suspected. The experimentalist himself can hardly be fully aware of it, for the reason that the men whose intellects he really knows about are much like himself in this respect" (251).
5. Significant works about reenactment include: Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1984); Richard Handler and William Saxton, "Dyssimulation: Reflexivity, Narrative, and the Quest for Authenticity in 'Living History,'" *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 3 (1988): 242-260; Jim Cullen, *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Janet Walker, *Trauma Cinema* (Berkeley (Calif.); London: University of California press, 2005); Adam Blatner, "Morenean Approaches: Recognizing Psychodrama's Many Facets," *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama & Sociometry* 59, no. 4 (2007): 159; Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums: Undoing History through Performance* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2007); S. Magelssen, "Rehearsing the 'Warrior Ethos': 'Theatre Immersion' and the Simulation of Theatres of War," *The Drama Review: TDR*. 53, no. 1 (2009): 47-

72; Jonathan Kahana, "Introduction: What Now? Presenting Reenactment," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 50, no. 1-2 (2009): 46-60; Iain McCalman and Paul A. Pickering, *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol; Chicago: Intellect, 2012).

6. Maysles discussed the advantages of the flip out screen of the video camera over the eyepiece of the film camera in terms of his capacity to make eye contact with subjects and better empathize with them in sensitive social situations. He praised the fact that he could shoot more footage much more cheaply, thereby increasing his chances of recording moments that would represent his subjects spontaneously and compassionately. He said he could take more chances experimenting with the aesthetic form of his work, and was no longer beholden in the same way to institutional financing to make it. While his assertions that the observational style allows him "to get closer to the truth rather than distant from it" open up the can of worms that led to so many incisive critiques of the direct cinema ethos in the 1970s-1990s (whose truth? To who's advantage? To what end? When and where is it true and why there?), it is worth noting that this avowedly empirical documentarian characterized the transformation to digital video in terms of empathy, proximity, and liveness rather than sobriety, scientific authority, and post-production manipulation (Stubbs, 2002, p. 5, 11).

Key recent studies on computer graphics and visual effects in the digital cinema industry include Stephen Prince, *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Kristen Whissel, *Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Contemporary Cinema* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2014).

7. I was surprised at how far the visage of Redcoat soldiers travelled in the three years after 9/11. The group of reenactors I joined and documented also appeared in a PBS American Experience documentary about Revolutionary War reenacting called *Patriots Day* (2004), the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, and a permanent, \$16 million exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum of American History in Washington DC titled "The Price of Freedom: Americans at War." Commissioned shortly after September 11, 2001 during a time of heightened jingoistic sentiment nationally, the exhibit covers every major war or conflict that involved U.S. soldiers between the mid 1700s and 2003. The Smithsonian paid groups of Redcoat reenactors—including the one I had joined—to stage the massacre of Lexington colonists for their film cameras, recording the event from perspectives simulated to be those of Minutemen on April 19, 1775. The edited video loop now serves as the centerpiece for the first area of the exhibit. When visitors standing between wax sculptures of two Lexington minutemen press a button labeled "Push here to start," a video of Redcoat reenactors appears on a screen facing the museum goer. The Redcoats on screen launch into a one minute frontal attack, complete with the bayoneting of the camera lens-turned-viewer-perspective. The visceral experience is meant to represent the start of the U.S. Revolutionary War for museum visitors of all ages, and it plays almost continuously everyday while the museum is open. My feelings about briefly appearing on screen in it remain conflicted.

8. Articulated in Michel Foucault's 1975-6 lecture series "Society Must Be Defended," biopolitics referred to a set of impersonal mechanisms of state control set upon subjects, who then became their front-line enforcers. These included categories of illness and perversion, sexual inclinations, liberal economics, and juridical professions, amongst many others.

9. Following Aretha Franklin's use of the term as an emblem of black female empowerment in her 1967 song "Respect," "Sock It To Me" became the famous tagline of a recurring misogynist motif on the TV variety comedy show *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In* (1968-73). At the end of the show, a dancing, bikini or miniskirt clad woman (usually Judy Carne or Goldie Hawn) would sensually declare that it was "sock it to me time." An unidentified party off screen would then douse her with water, open a trap door beneath her feet, or visit her with some other indignity. U.S. soldiers in Vietnam wrote variations of the term on their helmets as an expression of longings for sex, and as a dubious metaphor for their unenviable (and possibly feminized) position on the ground in Vietnam. The phrase was also reappropriated in the film *Fight Club* (1999) when the unleashed id character Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt) wears the slogan on a white T-shirt, replicas of which consumers may still procure from dozens of online outlets. [[return to page 3](#)]

10. In addition to a hefty monograph on "the Cambridge turn" in ethnographic film and personal documentary by Scott MacDonald (2013), the flagship journal *Visual Anthropology Review* dedicated a full volume of scholarly essays to *Leviathan*. Editors Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn characterized the film as "groundbreaking. By decoupling voice from any stable narrative perspective, it allows the viewer to be made over by a world beyond the human. It is, we argue, a form of dreaming—a modality of attention that can open us to the beings with whom we share this fragile planet. As such, *Leviathan* gestures to a sort of ontological poetics and politics for the so-called Anthropocene" (49).

11. Other notable films associated with this group include *Sweetgrass* (2008), *Terrace of the Sea* (2009), *Foreign Parts* (2010), *Manakamana* (2013), *The Iron Ministry* (2014), *Into the Hinterlands* (2015), and *Linefork* (2017).

12. Note that I am only referring to *In Country* in this example. Other Vietnam films including Lynn Novak and Ken Burns' series *The Vietnam War* (2017) feature interviews with individuals who we see pictured as younger selves in archival footage. In *In Country*, alternatively, we see several of the Vietnam War reenactors in their own archival footage taken during the Iraq War.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A dead seal on a plastic-littered shore.
[iStock.com/bearacreative]

Shadow films: picturing the environmental crisis

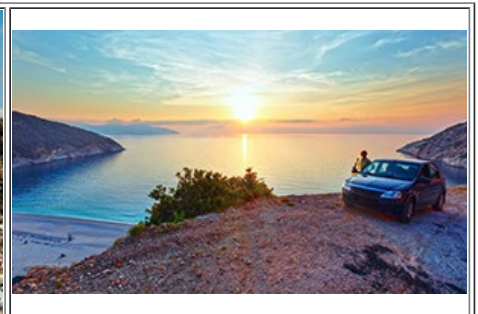
by [Claudia Springer](#)

One certainty exists in our global crisis: we respond to the possible demise of life on Earth based not only on what we personally experience but also on widely distributed pictures.

Disturbing images of environmental degradation populate our screens: dying animals, people struggling to survive in inhospitable conditions, disfigured bodies, floods, toxic water, devastated land, and mountains of trash. We also encounter greenwashed images of vehicles that supposedly protect our environment by using less gasoline or reducing plastic in their production or transporting bicycles to remote locations or contributing to clean-up projects. Pictures now constitute our world more than actual landscapes, and while they expand our reality into infinite realms, they also provide ammunition in ideological battles over the environment.



Mountains of garbage.
[iStock.com/neenawatt]



Car manufacturers claim to benefit the environment. [iStock.com/j-wildman]



Flood waters in an Indiana town.

We inevitably accumulate eco-imagery in our minds. New imagery merges with what we have seen in the past in what I call shadow films. This internal collection conjures up relevant pictures from all sources without necessarily distinguishing between actuality and fantasy, documentary and fiction. Our personal eco-imagery has implications for film viewing: both fiction and documentary films rely on the organization of ideas regardless of the mode in which they are delivered. When we watch documentary films, they encourage us to consider our internal archive of gripping and memorable fictional sequences, and we blend the restrained evidence in front of us with familiar fictional plot lines. Likewise, fiction films can conjure up documentary evidence of threats to our planet. Knowing about the actual existence of a frightening scenario makes it more compelling, and knowing that a fictional response to environmental crisis could have real-world applications boosts its believability and importance. Our shadow films expand each time we watch a film of any kind, giving our viewpoints elaborate storylines to support or challenge them.

Research shows that we understand stories because our minds create models of

[iStock.com/EEI_Toni]



Misleading ads link plastic water bottles to nature and healthy living. [iStock.com/Artimedvedev]



Water bottles pollute the planet. [iStock.com/Magdevski]

Utah Monument Review

5/17/2017



Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke (right) on the DOI website.

their events, explains psychologist Jeffrey M. Zacks (21). He uses the term *event model* to refer to the "representation in your head that corresponds systematically to the situation in the story" (21). While an event model is not identical to the story we are following, it is "accurate enough that you can use it to run simulations that can tell you about parts of the situation you may have missed and to infer what might happen soon" (21). The event models we create to make sense of a film draw on information we have accumulated from all sources (Zacks 25). I propose that when we watch an eco-film, our event model enables us to comprehend it, and its story joins all of the other stories and images in our minds to create an elaborate shadow film with both documentary and fictional components.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of climate change and global environmental destruction, deniers like to rely on doctored images to make claims to the contrary. A fine line separates the trickery that makes the photographic and digital arts possible by creating the illusion of three-dimensionality and movement, and the trickery that misrepresents urgent environmental issues. Anyone can create or find pictures to support any view. For the powerful forces invested in preserving the status quo, even limited environmental protections that threaten traditional modes of corporate profit-making provoke fierce opposition. Corporate stakeholders wield political power through lobbying and donations, and, increasingly, they hold government positions. A 2016 study by the Center for American Progress Action Fund found that 34% of American Congress members denied climate change and had been paid over \$73 million in contributions by oil, gas, and coal companies. Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, who famously claimed that climate change is "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people," has reportedly accepted more than \$2 million from the fossil fuel industry (Herzog). The fallout from political inaction means that people have lost their lives in the U.S., China, Nigeria, Ecuador, and Peru, among other countries, because of the oil, gas, and mining industries' toxic practices and attacks on opponents. The propaganda battles fought with images inflame a war with catastrophic consequences.

Even those with noble intentions freely manipulate visual evidence or cause unintended consequences. Environmentalists often hold individuals accountable for the ecological crisis, writes historian Finis Dunaway, obscuring the much greater role of industrial practices and policies put in place by our elected officials: "Deflecting attention from corporate and government responsibility, popular images have instead emphasized the idea that individual Americans are personally culpable for pollution and other environmental problems" (2). Dunaway argues that saturating people with guilt-inducing images in a "moralistic cleanup crusade" has not been an effective way to build a movement for an economic and political overhaul (6).

The environmental wars heated up with the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2016 on a platform hostile to environmental regulations. Not surprisingly, he filled his cabinet with corporate leaders and announced American withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement within his first few months in office. Just as quickly the Interior Department redesigned its website to emphasize human use of federal land and water instead of preservation. Stewardship, according to the new website, means "ensuring that these lands are available for recreation, job growth and creation, and responsible energy development." Gone are the extensive photographs of wild animals and glorious landscapes that graced the previous administration's website. Instead Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is center stage on the website's galleries with image after image of him visiting national parks and monuments, riding horses, shaking hands, striding over scrubby terrain, posing with individuals and groups, and giving the thumbs-up. Meanwhile the Environmental Protection Agency eliminated all of the pages on its website documenting the scientific climate change research conducted by previous administrations. Needless to say, conservationists held no hope that the Trump administration would meet environmental challenges successfully.



Black Lives Matter protesters speak out against injustice. [iStock.com/Coast-to-Coast]



Standing Rock Sioux protest the Dakota Access pipeline. [Getty Images/Jim Watson/Staff]

Effective legislation fails to exist in part because poor people and people of color disproportionately bear the brunt of environmental deterioration. Wealthy white communities avoid the worst consequences of climate change, a temporary privilege of status and money. Journalist and social critic Naomi Klein puts it clearly when she writes that "The reality of an economic order built on white supremacy is the whispered subtext of our entire response to the climate crisis." She goes on to argue that the inequity is not random, but rather "the result of a series of policy decisions that governments of wealthy countries have made—and continue to make—with full knowledge of the facts and in the face of strenuous objections" (Klein "Why"). Klein reports that the far right goes so far as to cast climate-change casualties as desirable by gloating that death and destruction in vulnerable regions strengthen wealthy centers of power ("This Changes" 52). These deniers dismiss the first victims of climate change as troublemakers.

Among the objectors is the Black Lives Matter movement, which argues that inaction on climate change is part of systematic racist policies in the United States. Native Americans lead another protest frontline, as seen in North Dakota where the Standing Rock Sioux occupied land slated for the Dakota Access pipeline to call attention to its desecration of ancestral lands and threat to the Missouri River. In response, the Obama administration enacted a temporary halt to the pipeline's construction, but the Trump administration immediately reversed the decision and allowed the pipeline's completion. Media coverage, however, left indelible images of protesters marching with banners, standing with raised fists, engaging in prayer circles, riding horses, being threatened and attacked by law enforcement with police dogs, and getting shoved into police cars. On Instagram, YouTube, and Vimeo the images gained global currency.

Parched denuded land, vistas of trash, mountains of electronic refuse, putrid toxic waste: the catastrophic consequences of our failure to safeguard life-sustaining ecosystems appear in photographs showing evidence of damage on every continent. These photos at their best can induce us to advocate for radically changed priorities worldwide to protect the environment. They alert us to distant devastated regions and support passionate calls for change, such as Pope Francis's Encyclical on the Environment with its astute comment that "we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*"



Trash pickers in a landfill. [iStock.com/Brasil2]



Pollution and garbage surround people's homes. [iStock.com/tbradford]

But photographic evidence of injustice has to compete with the massive number of images inundating us and exhorting us to buy more stuff. Historian Daniel J. Boorstin wrote about image glut as early as 1961, noticing that images had superseded reality, that "what dominates American experience today is not reality" (x). To escape this deceptive reality, Boorstin advises us to "disenchant" ourselves, moderate our expectations, and "begin to suspect that there is a world out there, beyond our present or future power to image or to imagine" (260). Boorstin denounced our manufactured realities while acknowledging that they



The Grand Canyon at sunrise.
[iStock.com/Meinzahn]



Smog in New Delhi. [iStock.com/BDphoto]

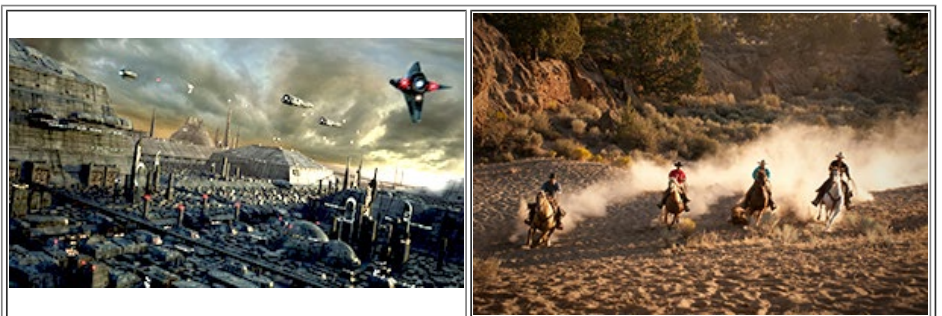
were inevitable given the rapid rise of advertising and public relations.

Now that we cannot return to life without media overabundance, we can assess how a steady diet of images has transformed us. I turn to the example of one of my students, who reported to me after spring break in the middle 1990s that he and a friend had taken a road trip from Rhode Island, where I was teaching at the time, to the Grand Canyon. After arriving late, they spent the night at a campground. Early the next morning they realized that they needed to return home for classes, so at dawn they went to the park's visitor center where they watched a video about the Grand Canyon, then got in their car and drove away. They had not seen the Grand Canyon. My student was unfazed by the substitution of the copy for the original or the fact that he could have watched the same video in his Rhode Island dormitory room.

The last several decades recalibrated our perceptions to a far greater extent than Boorstin could have envisioned. What does this mean for us as spectators, especially as viewers of documentary films that purport to tell us something about reality? Our responses cannot be pure and unadulterated. After all, as film scholar Patricia Aufderheide points out, "Media affect the most expensive real estate of all, that which is inside your head" (5). I ask: how do the images in our heads influence the way we engage with information?

Film scholarship tells us that we watch documentary films differently from fiction films. To understand the difference, film scholar Vivian Sobchack turns to Belgian psychologist Jean-Pierre Meunier's theory of cinematic identification, which suggests that we are most attentive when we watch fiction films because we gain new knowledge as we watch and cannot rely on our own experiences. Meunier observes that we are least attentive when we watch home movies because their images transport us into our own memories of people and events (Sobchack 244). Documentaries, according to Meunier, occupy a midpoint on a spectrum between home movies and fiction films, requiring us to pay close attention but also inviting us to consider what we already know. Nevertheless, these distinctions are flexible, making our identification "fluid, dynamic, and idiosyncratic" (Sobchack 253). I see this fluidity in the way that both documentaries and fiction films transport us into the stories and images they have each previously left in our minds.

In eco-documentaries, we find circumstances made familiar by fiction films, in particular, although not exclusively, genre films, which depend upon audience familiarity with their conventions. Documentaries evoke science fiction with global threats to our survival, horror with disfiguring diseases in humans and animals, detective or courtroom films with attempts to rectify an injustice, westerns with individuals pitted against each other and powerful institutions, and film noir with malevolent forces and convoluted explanations. These generic references contribute to our shadow films. And while we expect documentaries to adhere to facts, our personal shadow films can introduce any number of situations, however extreme, capable of heightening our concern or guiding us toward potential solutions to problems. Far from diminishing a documentary's capacity to move us, its shadow films can strengthen our understanding and intensify our response. **[images below moved, due to various heights]**



| | |
|--|---|
| Science fiction depicts dystopian cities. [iStock.com/BertrandB] | Westerns set individuals against corrupt institutions. [iStock.com/GaryAlvis] |
|  |  |
| Courtroom films accentuate the pursuit of justice. [iStock.com/RichLegg] | Film noir traps characters in labyrinthine cities and plots. [iStock.com/Diane39] |
|  | Horror films raise fears of bodily damage. [iStock.com/Hakaba] |

In the following pages I trace how two eco-documentaries— *Arid Lands* (Grant Aaker and Josh Wallaert, 2007) and *Crude* (Joe Berlinger, 2009)—reverberate with shadow-film implications by evoking fiction films. Many other films qualify for analysis, sometimes evoking each other even in their titles, as do the documentary *Garbage Warrior* (Oliver Hodge, 2007) and the fiction film *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (George Miller, 1981). Both films depict a time in which people scavenge the despoiled Earth, and they center on a resourceful "tragic eco-hero" (Murray and Heumann 91) who uses discarded objects in creative ways while battling hostile forces. In *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior's* chaotic post-nuclear-war world, survivors kill each other over access to scarce fuel. Max, played by the young Mel Gibson, transforms from a cynical loner into an ingenious savior after becoming involved with a rag-tag group of settlers struggling to survive. *Garbage Warrior* documents the efforts of an actual individual—the American architect Michael Reynolds—to prevent ecological catastrophe by radically redesigning the homes in which we live. These two films illustrate how dramatically the documentary and fiction film modes can correspond. From their combustion comes an energized viewing experience.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The Hanford Site in Washington State is the most contaminated nuclear waste zone in the United States. *Arid Lands*



The U.S. government spends billions annually to try to clean up Hanford. *Arid Lands*



The nuclear industry transformed Western vistas. *Arid Lands*

The radioactive West: *Arid Lands* and genre conventions

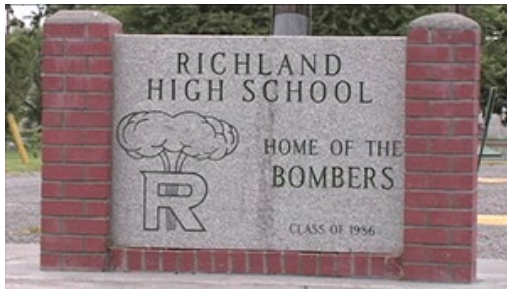
Arid Lands concerns 586 square miles in southeastern Washington State contaminated by approximately 475 billion gallons of hazardous wastewater left after the area became the nation's largest plutonium producer for nuclear weapons ("Hanford"). The now-closed Hanford site stores two-thirds of the high-level radioactive waste in the United States. A government cleanup effort spends \$4 billion annually with limited environmental results, except to attract new residents to a boomtown economy. While toxic waste seeps into the groundwater and rivers, new suburban housing covers the adjoining land and in the nearby Tri-Cities, cheerful references to atomic bombs are commonplace. Farms, fruit orchards, wineries, and a fishing industry vie for precious water, and members of the Yakama Nation whose ancestors were forced onto reservations watch their treaty provisions erode. Western and science fiction tropes haunt the film, from its soundtrack to its cinematography, making possible potent shadow films in our minds that dramatically convey the mess we have made.

The film belongs to a subgenre that acknowledges the American West's primacy in producing and testing nuclear weapons; philosopher John Shelton Lawrence calls them "nuclear ecofilms" (38). Examples include *Them!* (1954), *The Amazing Colossal Man* (1957), *The Atomic Cafe* (1982), *Desert Bloom* (1983), *Silkwood* (1983), *Thunderheart* (1992), and *The Plutonium Circus* (1994) (Lawrence 38). The subgenre now includes nuclear eco-video games such as *Fallout: New Vegas*, in which something called radaway can diminish the effects of radiation poisoning in the post-apocalyptic year 2281.

When nuclear eco-films are documentaries, they cannot help but blur their distinction from fiction films by evoking science-fiction and westerns to follow the West's trajectory from wilderness to garden to radioactive dumping ground. In so doing, they spotlight the long history of disaster in the American West; to obtain fertile land settlers transformed existing conditions in cataclysmic ways, including the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and New Deal-era dams. With the birth of the nuclear weapons industry in 1941, a new transformation occurred. Hanford was one of two sites chosen to produce plutonium for the Manhattan Project. Residents were evacuated from 670 square miles of land in 1943, including the Yakama who had signed treaties giving them permanent rights to their land. Fifty thousand workers arrived from across the country for top-secret work. Once production began, workers poured radioactive waste from the nine nuclear reactors into the Columbia River or ditches dug alongside its banks.

They built tanks for some of the waste, and a million gallons went directly into the ground. Hanford provided the plutonium for more than 50,000 nuclear weapons over forty years of frequent nuclear testing in Nevada and the South Pacific. Ultimately the plant constructed 177 giant tanks to hold a million gallons of waste per tank, and about 1/3 of those tanks have leaked. When Hanford closed in 1989, it became the largest and most expensive Superfund site in the country (Titus 65).

The West bore the brunt of nuclear production and testing in the U.S. and suffers from its lethal consequences, heaping irony onto frontier mythology. In the



Atomic bomb imagery permeates Richland, a town near Hanford. *Arid Lands*



Frontier mythology omits industrial pollution. *Arid Lands*



Science fiction and Western iconography merge in *Arid Lands*.



Russell Jim, head of the Yakama Nation's Environmental Restoration and Waste Management Program. *Arid Lands*

Western film iconography appears in *Arid Lands* in long shots and slow pans of shrub-steppe terrain and big skies, recalling the genre's wide open vistas. The film evokes stock characters with talking heads, such as a thoughtful Yakama elder with gray braids, Russell Jim, who speaks about his people's loss of land and fishing rights, bringing to mind the noble savage beloved of revisionist westerns. A preacher describes his mission to create an enormous thundering waterfall next to his church to display the glory of God, a surreal variation on the church as a symbol of civilization. Old-timers pit themselves against newcomers: family farmers with orchards disparage the newly arrived vineyard owners whose grape fields gobble up the land, and both condemn the developers responsible for ticky-tacky suburban encroachment; two geographers, one wearing a bandana around his neck like an outlaw gunslinger, deride the new generation of residents who lack wilderness skills; a fisherman criticizes the dam operators and the policy of raising and lowering the river depending on Portland's water needs, which sends fish floating across the banks when the water is high and kills them when the water recedes; an elderly displaced couple is nostalgic for the farm they owned before the federal government seized it. Conflict defines every issue, including access to scarce water and its safety for drinking. And young people in the nearby town of Richland play the role of "savages" by getting pierced and tattooed at the Atomic Tattoo shop, where mushroom clouds are a favorite design. Twangy guitars and loping rhythms on the film's soundtrack use the western's musical conventions.



A rainwater tank near Hanford. Western history and the Western film genre feature conflicts over resources. *Arid Lands*



Mushroom cloud tattoos are popular at Richland's Atomic Tattoo and Piercing shop. *Arid Lands*

Science-fiction features intermix with these western traditions: super-secret government work on catastrophic weapons; the careless and bungled discharge of billions of gallons of hazardous waste; a contaminated region half the size of

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Rhode Island; radioactive waste seeping into a deceptively idyllic river used for fishing, boating, and drinking water; pristine shrub-steppe terrain that owes its existence to the fact that it is unsafe for human habitation; cannibalistic insects that devour each other unless they are put in a stupor induced by cold storage; salmon loaded into giant tanker trucks and driven to their destination because dams block their upstream journey; and repetitive electronic notes on the soundtrack.



Hazardous waste flows in the river near Hanford in this deceptively idyllic scene. *Arid Lands*

Hanford's radioactivity imperils human life and evokes science-fiction threats to bodily integrity. *Arid Lands*



Unprotected U.S. soldiers observed atomic bomb tests in the Western desert. *Arid Lands*

These sci-fi aspects of the film resonate with the strange actual history of atomic testing in the West. To assess the consequences of nuclear attacks on humans, the government built "Doom Towns" in the Nevada desert with houses containing household products and dummies (Titus 14). The military repeatedly prioritized its desire for close-up inspection over the known risks of contamination (Titus 14). Observers in New Mexico at the first atomic test wore sunscreen and dark glasses and lay face down on the ground. Subsequent testing burned and killed cows and horses grazing nearby with radiation poisoning (Jacobsen 102). In fact, tests on dead animals after their exposure to dirty bombs (those that simulated the crash of an airplane carrying a nuclear weapon) revealed that the half-life of plutonium is 20,000 years (Jacobsen 113). Plutonium is so deadly that "one-millionth of a gram...will kill a person if it gets in his or her lungs" (Jacobsen 113). Even so, communities and pop culture embraced all things atomic. In Las Vegas, swanky people sipped atomic cocktails, women could get the atomic hairdo, the Sands Hotel held a Miss Atomic Bomb pageant, and the Detonators of Devastating Rhythms and Atom Bombers played songs like "Atomic Bomb Bounce" (Titus 93). Billboards for Atomic Motels and Atomic Cafes transformed the Western landscape (Titus 88). Nuclear blasts were all the rage!

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A-bomb terms entered everyday life near Hanford, with or without irony. *Arid Lands*



Science fiction prompts us to question the wisdom of living on a Nuclear Lane. *Arid Lands*

After this brief buoyant period came the reality of atomic residue. Sites that suffered the greatest destruction, like Hanford, are now called national sacrifice zones in federal documents (Titus 158).

The notion of sacrifice has a long history in Western frontier ideologies. It characterized early settlers who perished in harsh conditions and, as historian Richard Slotkin points out, it was also evoked for General George Armstrong Custer, whose 1876 death at the Battle of the Little Bighorn was seen by some as "a kind of atoning sacrifice, almost Christ-like" (10). Sacrifice also echoes in revisionist western films that celebrate "noble" Indians who quietly mourn the slaughter of their people. According to frontier mythology, sacrifices had to be made for the Western garden to bloom.



An extreme long shot shows industry surrounded by desert in a setting eerily reminiscent of *Mad Max 2*. *Arid Lands*



Radioactivity jeopardizes the promise of Western abundance. *Arid Lands*

Radioactivity, however, poses a substantial challenge to the myth's promise that sacrifice leads to abundance. Ironically, it also arose from the myth, for, in Slotkin's words, "behind the mystique of the 'virgin land' lay the principle of the 'resource Frontier'" which beheld the West as a mother lode of resources in addition to land: "precious metals, industrial ores, supplies of cheap labor" (531). Western resources included beaver pelt, gold, silver, and oil, along with waves of immigrant laborers. The promise of "virgin land" and resources drew the nuclear industry West and led to a domino effect of sacrifices that are still toppling over.

New residents of the area around Hanford do not have sacrifice on their minds. They see Hanford as a land of opportunity not unlike the wild-West or outer-space frontiers, in this case funded by federal cleanup dollars. As one of the film's commentators points out, some of the same people who rail against big government handouts themselves reap the benefits of Superfund money. Inconsistencies abound, and the film ends with the situation at an impasse. Environmentalists warn that radioactive damage is irrevocable, and economists predict a likely financial crash after the government ends its involvement, warnings that people living and working near Hanford do not want to believe. Meanwhile, the despoliation continues, with news reports of tanks discharging up to 300 gallons of "highly radioactive slurry" per year ("Six Storage Tanks"). In 2017, a tunnel storing radioactive material collapsed, causing an emergency for hundreds of workers at the site and renewing fears about widening contamination.



New suburbs house residents drawn to Hanford's Superfund site and potential prosperity. *Arid Lands*



Some residents assail big government while benefiting from Superfund money. *Arid Lands*

How should an environmental disaster of Hanford's magnitude be addressed and competing interests satisfied? Answers do not exist in real life or the film. As a documentary, *Arid Lands* follows the conventions of reportage, and therefore it can only refer to the future as unknown. But the film's generic borrowings create shadow narratives in spectators' minds, and these address the question that *Arid Lands* cannot answer: "What does the future hold for Hanford?" Hypothetical answers occur in sci-fi films that represent social conflict in the aftermath of apocalyptic destruction, and westerns concerned with land use and abuse. These shadow film can conjure up frightening images of blighted land and creatures, widespread illness, birth defects, a breakdown of law and order, vigilante violence, and death.

The cheerful optimism of residents who are riding a wave of economic prosperity resembles oblivious characters ignoring the warning signs in the pre-catastrophe scenes from *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* and *The Terminator*. Sadly, the shadow films conjured up by *Arid Lands* do not offer a solution to the problem of Hanford. But they can guide us toward the conclusion that this kind of environmental disaster should never be allowed to happen again.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



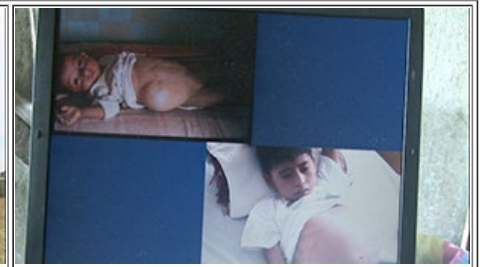
The oil industry leaves contaminated sludge in the Amazon rainforest. *Crude*

The poisoned Amazon: *Crude* and underdog narratives

Crude documents a class-action lawsuit on behalf of 30,000 Ecuadorians against the Chevron Corporation for its contamination of the Amazon rainforest. This award-winning documentary film makes its case against Chevron with damning footage shot in Ecuador of oily sludge, decimated indigenous populations, deformed bodies, dead animals, and profound suffering. We follow the efforts of a modest young Ecuadorian lawyer joined by a brash U.S. attorney to take on the oil giant, whose representatives deny the charges with their own lawyers and public relations machine. The film reveals how the oil industry has ravaged villages along the Amazon River. Conventionally observational without stylistic flourishes, *Crude* relies on a steady accumulation of evidence to support its case. Its unremarkable style did not, however, prevent it from delivering a blow to Chevron, so much so that Chevron sued the filmmakers and launched a high-profile ad campaign touting its commitment to preserving the environment and protecting indigenous people, along with, of course, its own reputation.



Children drink water from a Texaco oil drum. *Crude*



The oil industry's pollution causes birth defects. *Crude*



Attorney Pablo Fajardo at his murdered brother's grave in Shushufindi, Ecuador. *Crude*

Crude is an effective exposé, with its familiar documentary conventions conveying the information necessary to understand the legal clash between Chevron and the plaintiffs. But, I would argue, the film's power to win its viewers' sympathies on the side of the Ecuadorians lies in part in the way it evokes the horror, detective, science fiction, courtroom, and western genres. *Crude* provides a compelling example of the shadow-film phenomenon about two-thirds of the way into the film when we see the young Ecuadorian lawyer, Pablo Fajardo, who is the plaintiffs' lead prosecutor, gazing at a grave. We already learned that he grew up in rural poverty and at 14 years old went to work in the oil fields, where he observed how oil extraction degraded the environment and sickened its inhabitants. His concern inspired him to go to law school, and he had been out of school for only three years with very little litigation experience when he took on the case against Chevron. In the cemetery sequence, he explains that this is the grave of his brother Wilson who was killed by men who were actually after Pablo because of his work against Chevron. They tortured his brother so severely before killing him that they left nothing of his face to recognize. We watch Pablo sweep debris off his brother's headstone. He refrains from speaking about his sorrow; he simply describes what happened to his brother, and his somber face and gentle gestures convey his grief. The scene uses medium and long shots, avoiding potentially intrusive close-ups. What we see is a trope from the western genre: a solitary man mourns and renews his commitment to persevere against a powerful and corrupt institution, despite the odds. A similar scene exists in *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946), in which Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) quietly visits



Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) at his murdered brother's grave pledges to make the country safe in *My Darling Clementine*.

the grave of his murdered brother James before dedicating himself to finding the killers and upholding justice. Even if we have not seen *My Darling Clementine*, *Crude* might evoke in our shadow film the western convention that links quiet anguish with a fierce desire to fight on.

Crude also evokes courtroom dramas. In several powerful scenes Pablo Fajardo and Chevron's lead attorneys, Adolfo Callejas and Diego Larrea, each make their case, sometimes before an Ecuadorian judge—the case moved from the U.S. to Ecuador in 2003, ten years after it was filed in the U.S. courts—and at other times before court-appointed investigators. Most of these scenes take place outdoors at contaminated sites instead of in an actual courtroom, but the legal thriller's conventions still prevail, in particular the tension evoked by hearing a principled lawyer's passionate testimony countered by a slick attorney's deceptive counterarguments.



Pablo Fajardo presents the case against Chevron to a court-appointed investigator inspecting a polluted site. *Crude*



Chevron attorneys Adolfo Callejas and Diego Larrea defend the oil giant. *Crude*



Chevron shifts blame for the toxic conditions to Texaco and Petroecuador. *Crude*

Chevron argues as its primary defense that it inherited the problem of contaminated wastewater in the Amazon when it merged with Texaco in 2001, that Texaco had produced the toxic spills during the 1970s and 1980s, and that Chevron cleaned up Texaco's mess after the companies merged. According to Chevron, the Ecuadorian national oil company Petroecuador, which has controlled oil production in the country since 1990, is solely responsible for the current toxic conditions. Will Chevron's defense sway the judge, or will he believe Pablo Fajardo's evidence that Chevron failed to remediate Texaco's extensive damage? These sequences derive suspense from our knowledge of courtroom films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Philadelphia*, *Erin Brockovich*, or *Michael Clayton*. By summoning dramatic shadow scenarios, *Crude* makes the case against corporate greed even more powerfully than what we actually see and hear.



Flaming oil fields resemble catastrophic end-of-the-world imagery in science-fiction films. *Crude*

Crude evokes a nightmarish science-fiction shadow film about our own neighborhoods getting engulfed by oily sludge bubbling up from beneath the ground and poisoning our water, causing our pets to sicken and die and our relatives and neighbors to grow large malignant tumors. *Crude* at times resembles a terrifying horror film—young children with swollen bellies and rashes, a duck lying on its back twitching uncontrollably, thick black toxic goop oozing through the ground under people's homes. But *Crude* can also evoke a shadow film narrative in which victims have agency and succeed in getting Chevron to pay damages. This shadow film would combine a documentary's educational rhetorical strategy, what film theorist Bill Nichols calls an "informing logic," with what he calls a "compelling story," the primary mode of fiction films (43). Nichols explains that these two rhetorical strategies are not mutually exclusive, but that an informing logic tends to dominate in documentaries. Shadow films heighten the compelling stories evoked by a documentary's informing logic.





Oil fouls Amazonian rivers. *Crude*



Toxic water causes skin rashes. This is a 20-day-old infant. *Crude*



A boy holds dead chickens in a region where the oil industry has decimated animal life. *Crude*



A duck contaminated by oil lies trembling on its back. *Crude*

Crude illustrates the phenomenon known as the curse of natural resources which leaves people worse off after the discovery of valuable resources on their land. Investigative journalist Tom Burgis writes that "[t]he resource curse is not merely some unfortunate economic phenomenon, the product of an intangible force; instead it is the consequence of systematic looting" (7). He points out that nineteenth-century colonialist policies evolved into contemporary strategies for corporate enrichment, involving "phalanxes of lawyers representing oil and mineral companies with annual revenues in the hundreds of billions of dollars" that impose "miserly terms on... governments and employ tax dodges to bleed profit from destitute nations" (Burgis 8). Social scientists write extensively about possible causes for the natural resource curse, but given the extractive industries' enormous power to monopolize wealth, of course local people lose out. Their increasing poverty correlates with growing corporate wealth.



Amazonian children play near an oil pipeline. *Crude*



Women wash clothes and children swim in tainted rivers. *Crude*



Cofán protesters carry signs. Oil pollution has ravaged the indigenous Cofán culture in the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Crude*

Crude ends on a hopeful note. *Vanity Fair* publishes an article about the case championing Pablo Fajardo as a hero. He wins the CNN World Heroes Award in 2007 in the category "Fighting for Justice." Trudie Styler, who along with her husband Sting founded the Rainforest Foundation, visits polluted Amazonian



Trudie Styler visits a Cofán village and learns about the need for drinkable water. *Crude*



U.S. attorney Steven Donziger tells an Ecuadorian judge that Chevron lawyers use corrupt tactics. *Crude*



Their differing styles give Pablo Fajardo and Steven Donziger the semblance of uneasy partners in a buddy-cop film. *Crude*

villages and donates barrels that gather and purify rainwater, providing potable water for 4,000 people. Sting and The Police perform at a concert for environmental awareness in New York with Pablo Fajardo in attendance. The leftist Rafael Correa wins the Ecuadorian presidential election in 2007, raising hopes that he will hold multinational corporations accountable instead of catering to them like his predecessors. And an independent investigator appointed by the Ecuadorian court holds Chevron responsible for disastrous environmental pollution and recommends a fine of up to \$27 billion.

The Ecuadorian court delivered a guilty verdict against Chevron in 2011 (after *Crude* was released) and imposed a \$19 billion fine, later reduced to \$9.5 billion. But the case continued. Chevron refused to pay anything and filed a lawsuit in the U.S. courts. A series of trials pitted Chevron against *Crude*'s director Joe Berlinger, with Chevron demanding that he turn over all of his outtakes from the film, claiming that they would reveal improper conduct on the part of Steven Donziger, the American attorney who represented the Ecuadorian plaintiffs. Chevron accused Donziger of bribing an Ecuadorian judge and an independent investigator to obtain a guilty verdict. In a 2014 verdict, a U.S. District judge did not dispute the existence of deadly oil pollution or Steven Donziger's good intentions, but pointed out that "an innocent defendant is no more entitled to submit false evidence, to co-opt and pay off a court-appointed expert or to coerce or bribe a judge or jury than a guilty one" (Krauss). He ruled in favor of Chevron, which declared itself exonerated of all charges and not liable for any damages to the Ecuadorians. Donziger denied that he engaged in bribery and planned to appeal, arguing that Chevron bribed a former Ecuadorian judge to fabricate testimony against him. That former judge has since admitted that he lied about receiving bribes from Donziger, and revealed that Chevron paid him bribe money for his cooperation (Hershaw).

For viewers of *Crude*, it might not come as a surprise that questions arose about Donziger's conduct; we see his aggressive style and frequent use of foul language throughout the film. His approach directly contrasts with Pablo Fajardo's restrained, unpretentious manner and earnest belief that the truth will triumph. Irony lies in Fajardo's principled pursuit of justice getting undermined by an American attorney from the land of Chevron who may have derailed the case. And yet this scenario too can conjure up a shadow film from fictional antecedents: the *Lethal Weapon* scenario of two men fighting for the same cause using incompatible methods. Fajardo and Donziger are real people, but once they are videotaped and edited into a film, they also become familiar characters in a shadow buddy-cop film.

Our shadow films could suggest that with patience and continued effort, the Amazonian communities might still receive restitution from Chevron, despite the increasing unlikelihood of this outcome. On June 19, 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court announced that it would not hear an appeal of the verdict that ruled in Chevron's favor. In the meantime, Joe Berlinger made another documentary: *Whitey: United States of America v. James J. Bulger*. It follows the 2013 trial of the notorious fugitive from justice, gangster James "Whitey" Bulger, who, along with his thuggishly nicknamed associates, controlled criminal enterprises in eastern Massachusetts during the 1970s and 1980s, and was found guilty of participating in 11 murders and 31 counts of racketeering, money laundering, weapons possession, and extortion. With such an evocative narrative, is it possible to watch a documentary about Bulger's trial without conjuring up vivid shadow films? Is it possible to watch *any* documentary without supplementing its story with the compelling fictional images that circulate not only around but also within us?

Just like a movie

We perceive not just films but reality itself as an image and sound stream, as becomes apparent when we say that something we have witnessed is just like a



The September 11 attack on the World Trade Center resembled disaster film imagery from the previous decade. [Getty Images/Spencer Platt/Staff]



The aftermath at Ground Zero recalls doomsday films. [iStock.com/Shutterworx]

movie. Movies try to replicate reality and reality appears to replicate movies. Media scholar Geoff King analyzes this phenomenon in the context of 9/11, observing that images of skyscrapers exploding in a string of blockbuster films from the 1990s uncannily resembled the planes hitting the World Trade Center's towers, producing *déjà vu* for many spectators looking at the towers fall (47). King clarifies that reality has not literally been subsumed by media constructions, despite some postmodern theorists' claims, but the visual and auditory presentation of each—their languages—are often alike (47). Television coverage of 9/11, for example, employed some of the same techniques as fictional spectacles, including continuity editing, sound bridges, and identification of heroes and villains (King 51-53).

The resemblance between actual catastrophes and movies exists not just in their appearance but also in our viewing stance, argues film scholar Bill Schaffer. In both, we cannot stop the course of deadly events and we have trouble forming our own individual responses. Movies confine our perceptions through camera placement, editing, sound, and character identification. Watching 9/11 events unfold in TV coverage or even on the scene produced a sense of helplessness, and this, writes Schaffer, constitutes part of the movie experience: "Terror and the moving image somehow 'put you in the same place'—or, rather, the same time, *the time of lateness*, in which one finds it is already impossible to respond, one sees the very impossibility of any response." Despite theories that grant power to the gaze (such as the male gaze inscribed in films that objectify women), the experience of watching the aftermath of terrifying events underscores our powerlessness. Helplessness, whether in real life or while watching a movie, is simultaneously dreadful and compulsive.

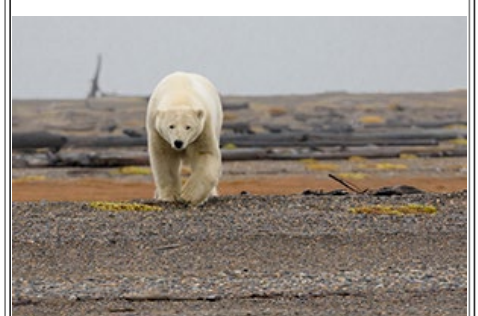
While we cannot prevent a catastrophic event after it has occurred, we might nonetheless *feel* as if we could take preventive action in a similar situation. This feeling enlivens the viewing experience, especially when we consider the ability of our shadow films to galvanize us, and this has implications for our responses to images of environmental damage. Unlike the events of 9/11, environmental catastrophes are ongoing and preventable. We know the causes of climate change and can take action against them. We know which human activities are poisoning people, degrading the land and water, fouling the air, destroying habitats, and killing off animal and plant species.




Industrial waste contaminates drinking water. [iStock.com/belovodchenko]



An open-cut mine destroys vast areas. [iStock.com/Dazman]



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| Rusting barrels leak into the ground and water. [iStock.com/hh5800] | Melting Arctic ice threatens polar bears. [iStock.com/Sarkophoto] |



A woman participates in the 2014 People's Climate March in New York City. [iStock.com/Andy Parker]

What we need is a concerted global commitment from governments and corporate leaders to do things differently, and for individuals to contribute at a grass-roots level. It is a massive unprecedented undertaking, but it is possible. So while we cannot undo the past, we can protect our future, and the movie experience has the potential to vitalize our efforts. Now more than ever, visual media and our own shadow films play an essential role in influencing what we think and do about our planet's future.

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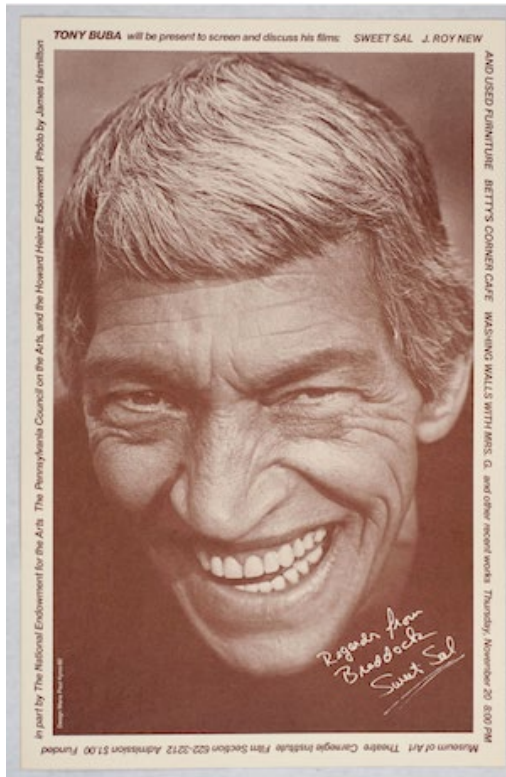
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Poster for Visiting Filmmaker Tony Buba at Museum of Art Theater, November 20, 1980. Department of Film and Video Archive, Carnegie Museum of Art. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

In memory of Braddock: Tony Buba's portraits of working-class life

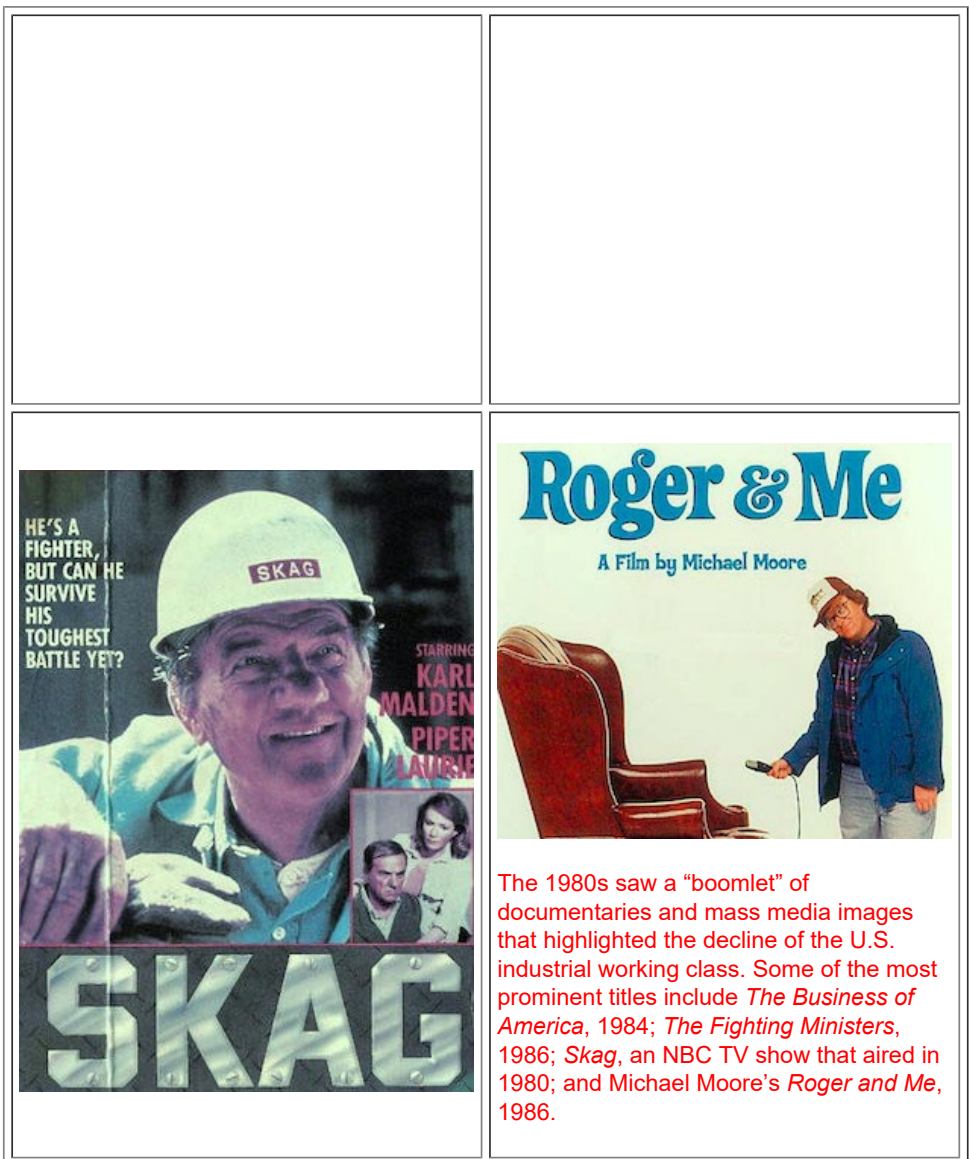
by [Benjamin Ogradnik](#)

Mass media images of ruin and the politics of the “familial gaze”

On November 20, 1980, the Carnegie Museum of Art published a poster for Tony Buba's omnibus film presentation as part of their ongoing Visiting Filmmaker Series. The poster featured a large, sepia-toned photograph of Sal Carulli, star of *Sweet Sal*, smiling into the camera. The photograph is enclosed by a picture “frame” made from scrolling text announcing the other titles from Buba series: *Sweet Sal*; *J Roy – New and Used Furniture*; *Betty's Corner Café*; *Washing Walls with Mrs. G*; and “other works” to be announced at the event. Sal Carulli's handwritten note, “Regards from Braddock” adorns the bottom of the picture, in the manner of a signed letter or postcard.

Reimagined as a photographic object, the movie poster resembles the sentimental ornament people might hang in their bedrooms or destined for some other domestic space. As such it invites ritualistic looking: one does not look at the figure once then turn away; rather, we are encouraged to dwell with the figure, looking often. The scrolling text of the other film portraits suggests, finally, an intertextual connection between *Sweet Sal* and the other works. Sal is the face of the “big long structure,” the network of familial and sentimental looks undergirding Buba's filmic portraiture. The movie poster, in short, encapsulates Buba's desire to humanize the milltown of Braddock, Pennsylvania, and its inhabitants.





Buba’s concept of the film portrait — a loving image of a person developed over multiple films, across multiple years — was born at a time when de-industrialization ravaged Western Pennsylvania. In the popular visual culture, a battle of ideas and images was waged over the identity of cities like Pittsburgh.[1] A “boomlet” of popular documentary films, like the *Business of America* (1984) and *The Fighting Ministers* (1986), and nationally broadcast TV shows, like *Skag* (1980), suggested that industrial United States as a whole was irreversibly changing and its working class people were out of step with an increasingly globalized economy. The steel mill, once wedded powerfully to the identity of cities like Youngstown or Pittsburgh, was shown on the nightly news disintegrating in a fiery explosion and disappearing into a cloud of darkened smoke.

Buba’s portraits of working class life were forged out of his wish to challenge historical forgetting and to enrich representations of industrial decline. A director of 36 films since 1972 and a Guggenheim Grant recipient in 1985, his film/video works span genres and modes as disparate as social documentaries, music videos, an interactive website, sponsored educational films, and fiction films. He has received most attention for a handful of documentaries and videos he made in the 1980s and 1990s that address the history and decline of the steel working industry in Western Pennsylvania. In particular, his 1996 *Struggles in Steel* examines the



Buba worked as a technical assistant on George Romero's major 1970s films, including *Martin* (partially shot in his mother's residence), *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Knightriders*.



The Braddock Chronicles: Volume 1 & 2.
Zeitgeist Films.

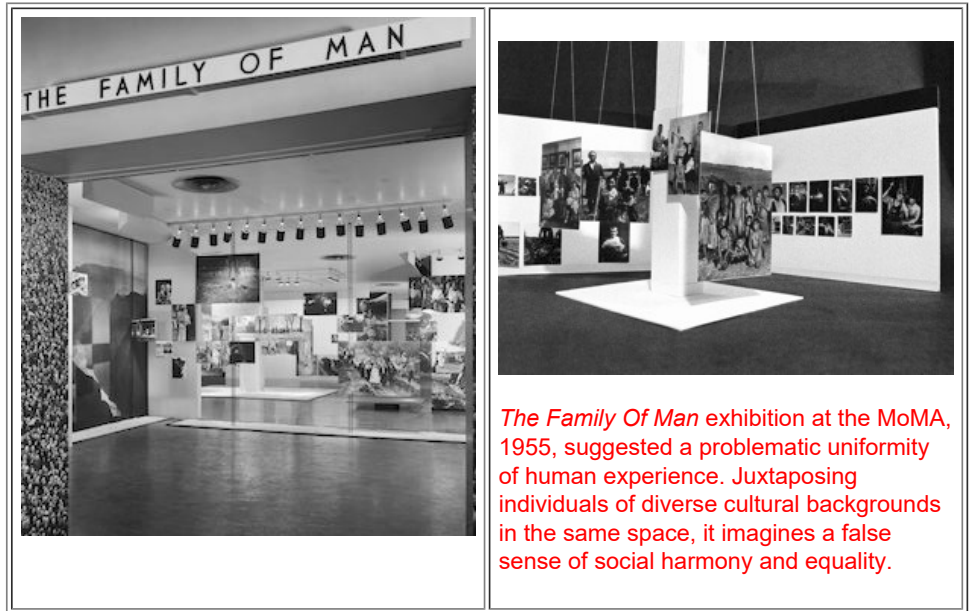
African American community's fight to gain employment in steel working and industrial sectors. Throughout his career, Buba has contributed to the creation of a "storehouse of memory," in Dolores Hayden's words, for working-class communities that are still grappling with the closure of mills, mines, and factories.[2]

Analyzing several notable film portraits from the *Braddock Chronicles*, I assert that Buba pursued a somewhat counterintuitive path to challenge and redefine the mediascape of deindustrialization in the 1970s and 1980s. He made a wide variety of home movies that documented the changing conditions of his hometown, and he tracked the reverberations of economic disaster through the perspective of the ordinary person. Though Buba is conventionally linked with more well-known documentarians, such as Michael Moore, and scholars have previously argued that his visual style and rhetorical position as a filmmaker often bears a resemblance to postmodern aesthetics of so-called "New Documentary" in the 1970s and 1980s[3], I want to push away from these accounts and instead consider the centrality of family in his films. More than fashionable postmodern irony, his emphasis on family and familial relationships makes Buba unique as a socially conscious, Leftist documentarian. As I will show, family and family relationships arise throughout his work both as a recurring visual subject — his films center on family and familial dynamics — and as a mode of address to his audience. Through humor, intimacy and sentimentality, he tries to position his own audience as if they were extended family, rather than as detached, anonymous observers learning about an abstract topic.

My analysis focuses on the familial gaze he constructs in three of his films: *To My Family* (1972), *Sweet Sal* (1979), and *Voices From a Steeltown* (1983). My use of the phrase "familial gaze" comes from Marianne Hirsch's innovative research on the representation of family, memory, and history in postwar visual culture. Hirsch argues that the familial gaze refers to an "imaginary cohesion," a desire for wholeness and a wish for belonging that arises in visual depictions of groups of people defined as a family. She considers examples ranging from the 1955 photo exhibition *Family of Man*, to the Holocaust graphic-novel memoirs of Art Spiegelman, to the parodic self-portraits of North American visual artist Cindy Sherman. Hirsch reminds us that family is socially constructed and historically specific. The parameters of who counts as "family" is shaped by factors (ideology, nationality, religious status, and geography, to name a few) that are not always obvious to ordinary people creating narratives about themselves.

Reproducible technologies, such as photography and film, are especially powerful tools in regards to how we imagine ourselves and others. Given their presumed status of being a simple transcription of real life, film and photography tend to manufacture idealized images of family as though they were definitive, honest, and transparent. Tensions between siblings, parents and children, or extended families can be masked in a single stroke: saying *Cheese!* and smiling for the camera. In conventionalized form such as the simple photo album, the familial image can repress the existential and relational complexity of the album's depicted individuals. Conventional images can distort the messy and diverse nature of lived reality, reducing lives into stereotypical (and normative) constructions of happiness and static harmony. At their worst, conventional images tend to universalize one hegemonic kind of familial organization — most often the heterosexual, patriarchal, nuclear family unit — at the expense of other ways of being, relating and remembering.[4] Many scholars (including Hirsch herself) are therefore rightly skeptical toward the conservative and ideological

implications underlying images of family in contemporary media.



Yet it is also important to recognize that not all images of family, or “familiality” (to borrow another of Hirsch’s terms), are by their nature ideologically conservative. Nor is it the case that the visual depiction of family is innately hostile to historical consciousness, that the family must always be a form of forgetting or pernicious wish fulfillment. One need only look at the proliferation of recent artwork that challenges the State-imposed status of “social death” around the undocumented migrant. In order to contest the xenophobic ideology that frames immigrants as a seething, dangerous mass that threatens the bounded nation-state, documentarians have relied heavily upon family narratives, personal testimony, and visual remembrances to restore to these individuals a sense of cohesive identity and memory that would otherwise be at risk.[5]

At its most radical, familial representation, with its empathetic regard for the Other and its backward-looking glance towards the past, can redefine the boundaries of what is considered a proper citizen or even a proper human. And despite (or perhaps because of) the ongoing social and technological redefinition of what it means to be a family or a community, the desire to comprehend one’s place in the world and to form intimate, familial or quasi-familial connections with others seems to be only growing stronger. This desire is manifested all around us in the current era of selfies, social media photography, digital portraiture and Snapchat ephemeral storytelling. As long as we feel a strong need to belong, feel loved, be seen and recognized by others on a personal level, familial images are here to stay.

Accordingly, my main claim in this essay is that Buba’s filmmaking deploys aesthetics of familiality for progressive ends. Rather than try to conceal processes of history-making or the reality of cultural difference, Buba develops an aesthetic around familiality in order to visualize dynamics of forgetting and remembrance, and to apprehend marginal groups that populated his industrial hometown. These groups were largely invisible in the public discourse. As Buba and his colleagues often complained, there was a dearth of “indigenous” perspectives on deindustrialization that reflected the views of people most affected by it.[6] He sought to change that by recasting deindustrialization through images of family, with a focus on the plight of ethnic immigrant groups. This did not result in a monolithic image of sameness but instead unleashed representing the diversity of how economic change was being internalized and experienced by people living in the same town. This critical recuperation of familial portraiture pushed against a tendency in mass media and so-called “New Documentary” films to objectify the newly unemployed working classes as oddities, objects of pity, or victims of global

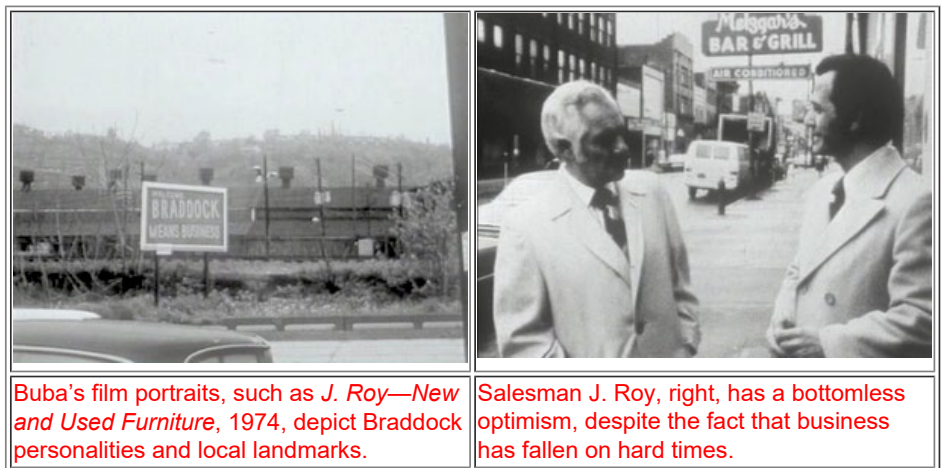
capitalism.

To refine how I analyze Buba's use of a familial gaze, I cite his interest in real and imagined family relationships; his frequent entwinement of space and memory, or what Guilian Bruno calls "geopsychic" space, as a motif running in his film portraits[7]; and his use of recurring characters across multiple films, which signals an awareness of historical discontinuity and change. These techniques not only challenge documentary protocols of the era, they more importantly add a sense of permanence and recovery to his portraits of Braddock in decline.

Geopsychic space, in Bruno's usage, refers to the intersection of cartography, imagination, remembrance, and shared identity in a physical site. Emotionally charged spaces and places such as churches, street corners, cemeteries, homes, backyards, libraries, schools and stadiums all function as powerful storehouses of memory. Captured on film, these spaces can transform into hubs for visualizing, collecting, and comprehending images of family against the capitalist march of "progress." In these films, Buba shows people both remembering spaces and remembering in and around certain physical sites that mattered to them (whether those spaces are still intact or not), restoring a sense of familial belonging across space and time. Buba's film career performs a kind of "geopsychic site-seeing" on his hometown of Braddock, generating a complex relation to time distinct from the simplified temporalities suggested by images of deindustrial ruin circulating at the time.

"A steel town's chronicler and conscience": on Buba's film portraits

Buba's earliest films, dubbed "The Braddock Chronicles," took the form of short, 5-20 minute film portraits, which he shot on 16mm and Super 8mm cameras while still a graduate student of film at Ohio University[8]. The films that comprise this body of work include: *To My Family* (1972, 3 minutes); *J. Roy – New and Used Furniture* (1974, 10 minutes); *Shutdown* (1975, 12 minutes); *Betty's Corner Café* (1976, 11 minutes); *Sweet Sal* (1979, 25 minutes); *Home Movies* (1980, 3 minutes); *Homage to a Mill Town* (1980, 2 minutes); *Washing Walls with Mrs. G* (1980, 6 minutes); *Mill Hunk Herald* (1981, 13 minutes); *Peabody and Friends* (1983, 7 minutes); *Voices from a Steel Town* (1983, 28 minutes); *Braddock Food Bank* (1985, 4.5 minutes); and *Birthday Party* (1985, 5.5 minutes).



The film portraits focus on friends and acquaintances living in Buba's hometown of Braddock. Lasting only several minutes, they pack emotional punch without overstaying their welcome. As described by one local critic,

"For Tony Buba's [portrait] films, a more character-oriented style is added to vérité [style filmmaking], and his own portrait-type

documentary emerges...Tony's camera records the sincerity, jive talk, and the random philosophy of his subjects in a cross-section of his hometown; we're permitted a keyhole view of unrehearsed human drama that turns with pathos and hilarity.”[9]

These films feature little to no didactic framing material (i.e., talking head interviews, title cards, etc.). All but one or two portraits employ a stark, black-and-white palette. Though budget rather than aesthetics was probably the main factor here, these monochromatic images carry, retrospectively, an unexpected resonance with the urgency and immediacy of agitprop newsreel films. The short film is often associated with other amateur visual forms, such as the home movie, photographic portraits and family albums. These visual forms, as Marianne Hirsch argues, are organized by a “familial gaze.” As Hirsch writes,

“When we look at one another within what we think of as our families, we are also the objects of an external gaze...the powerful gaze of familiarity which imposes and perpetuates certain conventional images of the familial and which ‘frames’ the family in both senses of the term.”[10]

Hirsch argues that forms of portraiture also are problematic forms of stability. However, in Buba's films, the attributes of stability, conventionality, and familiarity exist in opposition to the temporal decay, discontinuity, rupture, and isolation perpetuated by deindustrialization.



In *Mill Hunk Herald*, 1981, Buba blends vérité interviews of worker organizers with an accordion-led musical performance of “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” by the Braddock High School marching band.



The steel mills are either gone, or in the process of disappearing. *Mill Hunk Herald*.



Washing Walls with Mrs. G., 1980, recollects the history of Braddock in the image of Buba's own Italian lineage.

Buba created several film portraits as “sponsored” films to support the workers’ struggles in Braddock. In *Mill Hunk Herald*, 1981, Buba blends vérité interviews of worker organizers with an accordion-led musical performance of “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” by the Braddock High School marching band. Another sponsored film, *Braddock Food Bank*, 1985, is a silent piece that asks, via intertitles, whether it is better to make a movie about the poor or give them money directly.

The impression of familiarity, familiarity and intimacy works like a filter or veil over which Buba makes sense of his Braddock surroundings. As Carnegie Museum of Art film curator Bill Judson explains, “Critics find it essential to consider Buba as a person when writing about his films, because they recognize shared constellations of identity in the man, the town, and the films.”[11] *Washing Walls with Mrs. G* is shot exclusively inside the kitchen of his grandmother. Static long shots show his grandmother speaking about her migration to Braddock decades ago, in a heavy Italian accent (semi-translated with Buba's own subtitles). Meanwhile Buba, shown partially out of the frame, scrubs and cleans the walls.[12] As Buba has said, succinctly, of the film: “The title describes the film.” A sense of familiarity emerges in the fact that his depicted subject (his grandmother) is presented not as a stranger but a close and knowable

person.

Buba wished to have the viewer occupy and feel time itself through his films “with a sense of loss.”[13] Thus, he revisited and re-filmed the same individuals after many years, in order to catch up with them and to show how they’d changed along with him. Through the repeated exposure to the same individuals across different films, we see individuals “age” until the point of their death. Several individuals in particular tend to reappear – Sal Carulli, J. Roy, Margie Strosser, LeRoi, several salesmen, and unnamed by-standers. Seeing these reappearing characters produces a sense of déjà vu for viewers, a curiosity about how they live when they are not filmed, and a sense of loss as they aged, especially as some of the older characters died soon after Buba completed his filming.[14]

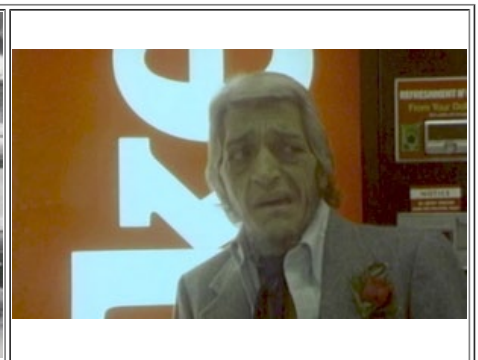


Peabody & Friends, 1983, is based on a Braddock resident who, years ago, fell several stories from his apartment and lost his wife and children during recovery.



The man cannot remember the details of his accident. *Peabody & Friends*.

Buba, finally, sought to create a web of connectivity across the portrait films. He accomplished this by screening them in an omnibus format, showing six or seven film portraits in a single event. While Buba believed that each film could be enjoyed individually, he has said in interviews that they were meant to be comprehended as part of what he called “a big long structure.”[15] The omnibus presentation format (placing the films in a series) lends a peculiar sort of connective tissue to them. Much like the *Sweet Sal* movie poster, which weaves the narratives of disparate Braddock citizens through the figure of Sal, the omnibus presentation format juxtaposes different individuals of varying class, gender and racial positions. This juxtaposition enables a “familial” form of looking: it establishes connections as well as differences between film subjects, and fosters “a series of ‘looks’ that both create and consolidate the familial relations among the individuals involved, fostering an unmistakable sense of mutual recognition.”[16]



The same individual often appears in different films. Sal Carulli appears in *Sweet Sal*, 1979, and *Lightening Over Braddock*, 1988.

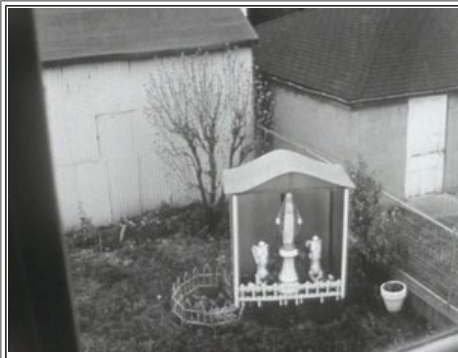


The youthful salesman in *J. Roy*, who in that early film was dressed in dapper formal wear, selling the viewer a piece of china with good cheer, is later shown in *Voices from a Steeltown* trying to explain the town's now-undeniable ruin; he clearly is no longer in the business of selling the American Dream.

But just as much as the serial nature of the films' presentation suggests presence and familial continuity, it suggests loss as well. The absence and gradual disappearance of certain characters, temporal gaps in between each film's production, and visible changes in Braddock's health as a town are constant reminders of a brutal fact: that time persists. The omnibus format, far from perpetuating an illusion of plentitude and wholeness, brings forth the painful reality of discontinuity. As Braddock's economic prospects fade and worsen, so too the subjects of the film portraits appear more pensive and reflective about their lives as they re-appear across Buba's films.

Film analysis: *To My Family* (1972, 3 min)

The first film of the *Braddock Chronicles* demonstrates most clearly Buba's statement on documentary film: it is a process involving the production of memory-images that alternately shock and console us into recollecting a lost past. Produced at Ohio University in 1972-1973, *To My Family* is a three-minute, black-and-white film, depicting Buba's grandfather's Braddock shoe-repair shop prior to its demolition.



The view from Buba's second-story kitchen window, from *To My Family*, 1972.



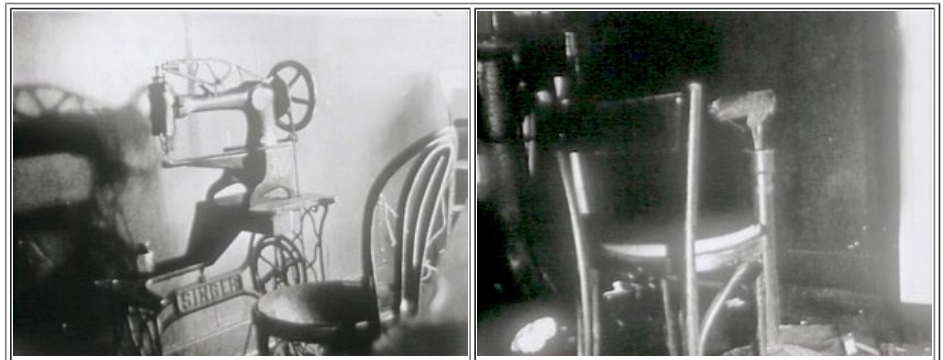
The shoe repair store. *To My Family*.

The film opens with a long shot depicting his mother's kitchen, eerily empty, with natural light shining through a far window. Next, in a point-of-view shot we look over an unkempt backyard, with a common, first-generation Catholic immigrant lawn statue commemorating the Virgin Mary. As the camera pans slowly across the yard, revealing nothing but empty lawn, the audio track plays a voice-over conversation between Tony and a woman, presumably his mother, in which they discuss the impending demolition of his grandfather's store.

In the second segment, the family's off-screen conversation triggers an abrupt

transition that transports us away from the Braddock home, in a kind of mental flashback, to Buba's grandfather's shoe repair store. From here, a montage sequence follows: a snapshot of the exterior of the storefront; a store sign, with Coca-Cola advertisement, naively inviting affordable and "expert" shoe-shine sessions; a photographic image of Buba's grandfather; and a poster of a proverbial shoe maker. The shoemaker is a white, elderly, bespectacled, but muscular man, proudly hammering into finished form a simple shoe, against a sign that reads, "Get Longer Wear by Shoe Repair."

Inside, we see the once-proud shoe store vacated of all human presence: half-empty shelves, torn strips of wallpaper hanging haphazardly in all directions, a workbench overstuffed with tools, boxes, and untold devices of industry. Heavy shadows give an impression of desertion, desolation: we are in a ruined site. Buba's camera lingers curiously over work tools, including a sewing machine and shoe-shine chair. Some of these objects trigger nondiegetic sounds of production (hammering) on the soundtrack, as if haunted by ghosts. The sewing machine casts a frightening shadow against the wall, and the chair's shining platform protrudes into space like a spire or prehistoric megalith. In other instances, the camera is positioned so close to the object that the only discernible visual is a tangle of chords and metallic fingers, suggesting the fossil of a long-dead creature, something no longer of this world.



Abandoned tools of the trade. Buba records images of a sewing machine and shoe-shine chair in quasi-photographic fashion. Without any perceptible movement by the camera, a disquieting stillness attaches to the space of the store. *To My Family*.

In the third and last segment, the repair-store flashback abruptly terminates. We return to the familiar shot of a second-story window, looking below onto the backyard. We hear, off-screen, Mother: "Hey Butch, your coffee's getting cold..." The film then cuts to a pair of white intertitles: "to my family / Produced at Ohio U., 1972-73."

As a historical record, the film is not about the shoe making industry or his grandfather, but rather is about the filmmaker's exploring his own increasing distance from these things. The film manifests his fear that an attenuated connection to family history will one day be completely severed. A metaphorical passage from adulthood to childhood occurs in the film's middle section. The viewer is aligned with adult Buba in the home, at the film's start, signaled by the high-angle shot which looks out onto the yard. Conversely, during the flashback to the shoe store, numerous low-angle, close-up shots of machines and tools place us in a fantasmatic position of Buba-as-child. In this child-like position, the world's objects loom large before us, overwhelming both the frame and our possibility of comprehension, not unlike how the adult world may appear unknowable, and threatening, to the young.

In this child-like position, the "found" objects in the repair shop are characterized by lingering, spectral traces of the shoe-worker's labor. The ghostly sounds of industry, ambiguous and opaque, give a sharp edge to Buba's exercise in memory-making: a viewer's awareness and consideration of the tools does not bridge the temporal distance that these objects represent. Indeed, Buba aestheticizes that

distance as a major cinematic strategy. For example, the sounds are fragmentary, incomplete, eerie; as such, they can only materialize his alienation from a previous generation.

And yet, Buba's careful attention to a "wasted space" before its demolition shows how powerful and generative his approach to the past can be. He adopts a reverent and exploratory attitude to spatial ruin. The shoe-repair-store-as-ruin is not forgotten, but is simultaneously enriched and haunted by traces of the past. As demonstrated in the film, these past traces have a special agency all their own which exceeds textbook historical treatment. That is, the false copy of the store-in-memory (and its falsified sounds of hammering, shining, and shoe-repair production) nevertheless brings a reorientation of oneself to the past. A revivifying sensation is registered and affirmed through the viewer's body, aligned with Buba-as-child: "something cross-temporal, something affective, and something affirmative circulates. Something is touched." [17] Even if the memory-image of the empty store is not the same as the store itself, it is "not not the thing", to borrow a formulation by Rebecca Schneider, in her writing on the paradoxical productivity of the double negative of historical reenactment. [18]

The store's disappearance, then, becomes a timely occasion for Buba's familial recovery and for the artistic creation of an investigative/forensic relationship to the past. Buba thus embarks on a model of documentary filmmaking heavily layered with a sense of "geopsychic" space — Giuliana Bruno's term for a folding together of memory and real concrete space, "a place where social geography and psychic paths are written together in a phantasmatic construction of the present." [19] This theme of real and imagined space and time folding together, in *To My Family*, becomes explicit through the stylistic contrast of nondiegetic sound and visual stillness. Later in subsequent portraits the pursuit of geopsychic space becomes the occasion for breakdowns in style and blurring of formal categories.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Film analysis: SWEET SAL (1979, 25 min)



Sal is aggressive, theatrical. As a street hustler he essentially is rootless: we see him in a diner, a restaurant, a bar, a clothing store, and driving (never working).

After his first film, Buba began to train his camera-eye away from himself and onto Braddock citizens. In broadening the sociological focus of his camera, these film portraits still retain a familial orientation. The films take place in domestic spaces and involve characters recounting lost connections to family members. *Sweet Sal*, another black-and-white short film, depicts a day in the life of middle-aged, streetwise hustler Sal Carulli, as he interacts with passers-by on the street, friends, acquaintances, shop owners, and his ex-wife. The film culminates in a visit to his deceased father's grave.

The film is noteworthy for its *spectral* treatment of a familial gaze, focused on a subject who seems at first to resist any need for family or social support, but who gradually reveals a deep and unfulfilled longing for love. I call this familial gaze “spectral” because the familial embedding and the “imaginary cohesion” which Sal desires only exists in his memory, revealing itself in fragmentary ways.



Sal tours the streets of Braddock. *Sweet Sal*, 1979, directed by Tony Buba.

Buba does not tease out Sal's unconscious desire for familiarity directly, but through a variety of visual strategies, most of all through a group-portrait framing of Sal. That is, Sal is deliberately placed within the camera frame (using wide and medium shots) alongside many other individuals in Braddock. Buba frequently places the camera on bustling street corners to capture the fading streetwise gangster in a lively urban habitat. In these moments, Buba's camera remains positioned to the subjects as close as possible, creating a sometimes claustrophobic jumble of multiple figures in the movie frame that recall the epic, quasi-mythic scope of the Mexican murals of Diego Rivera. The crowded, peculiar framing of Sal reduces him in stature, providing a visual counterpoint to his self-presentation. It hints at his repressed yearning for a “familial look” of recognition, and his increasing isolation within the wider community of which he claims to be a part.

The rising tension around family, communal belonging, and self-recognition reaches its climax in the penultimate scene. Sal takes Buba and film crew to the graveyard where his father is buried. The camera tracks Sal, bundled up in a coat, walking up along the steep side of the cemetery toward the grave of his father, Francesco Carulli. Standing above the grave, Sal tearfully addresses the camera: “He's in a place right here. Here's where I want to be.”



The use of the “group shot” forces the viewer to notice how Sal interacts with others.





Sal visits his father's gravestone in the cemetery.



He shakes his fist, wishing aloud that he could be dead, and his father still alive.



As he bends down to kiss the gravestone, the macho working-class exteriority of Sal crumbles.



And it becomes clear, as he gets up to leave, that he is a man haunted by the memory of the dead.

As Hirsch explains, family photographs and home movies “show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not.”[20] Similarly, in this moment at the grave site *Sweet Sal* documents a Braddock man’s desire for a familial structure no longer available to him: he is alone. We have seen that Sal strives to present himself to the world as a self-composed, powerful, independent person. But we have also seen moments where Sal’s exterior crumbles a bit. Indeed, Buba’s searching camera, his poignant framing of Sal in social situations, and the penultimate shot of the film at the graveyard all point toward a deep and abiding loss that defines Sal over and against this external projection of masculine strength. Through Buba’s camera the viewer witnesses the loss that Sal feels when he gazes at the tombstone of his father. Furthermore, the shot forces out an aspect implicit in all familial looking: that when we look to a parent or sibling, we desire to be looked at in return. That is to say, Sal’s desire is to recognize not only his father but himself, to be recognized by a parent.

The film dramatizes the quest for reciprocity that motivates much familial imagery. Hirsch elaborates on this aspect of reciprocity as a fundamental condition of the familial gaze in general. She does so by paraphrasing Roland Barthes’ key work on photography[21], where he spends considerable time analyzing the traces of an affiliative and identificatory bond with his photographed grandmother. Looking at a portrait of his grandmother, Barthes reveals a general dynamic of all familial looking: “Within the family, as I look I am always also looked at, seen, scrutinized, surveyed, monitored.”[22] Like Barthes seeking traces of himself in his grandmother’s portrait, Sal hustles the streets in the hope that he, too, could be “seen, scrutinized, surveyed, monitored,” so that his wandering look is reciprocated by someone who truly knows who he is.

The film evokes a still-resonant family history, figured as a ghost haunting the living. It suggests that the “imaginary cohesion” of familiarity need not always signify complacency with an ideological status quo. Especially in times of crisis, such a foregrounding of family memorializes a lost social bond and, in turn, it critiques the conditions of the present moment where people are unable to make

space for remembering.

Film Analysis: *Voices from a Steeltown* (1983, 28 min)

Voices from a Steeltown, a 28-minute color documentary, is the most refined instance of Buba's film portrait model. As the title suggests, the film is a *metaportrait*, consisting of not one but multiple "voices," perspectives, and communities of immigrants and minorities who find their realities shaken by the economic catastrophes of the 1980s. Characters we once saw in earlier black-and-white portraits, in *J. Roy* (1974), *Sweet Sal* (1979), and *Mill Hunk Herald* (1980), make return appearances. Buba does this expecting that the experienced viewer will suddenly feel a gentle sense of recall, of déjà vu.



A television shows Braddock in a state of decay. From *Voices from a Steeltown*, 1983.



The architectural wreckage of urban blight. *Voices from a Steeltown*.

The returning characters in *Voices from a Steeltown* stand in a distanced relation to Braddock. In this film, they speak directly to the camera and offer an explanation for the town's now-undeniable ruin. We might say his subjects have become aware of themselves as images; this awareness is evident in how they relate to Buba. They are alternately reticent and open about the town's fading history, not quite sure how the camera will depict them to the audience.

Further, by showing Braddock citizens reflecting on the past and placing them in ruined and wasted spaces that still retain importance in their lives, his documentary subjects come closer to the contemplative, nostalgic position that Buba himself occupied in *To My Family*. They are much like the European survivor of World War II, depicted in Italian Neo-Realist films as a wandering character defined by passivity (rather than heroism), an individual who felt the need to feel and observe the changes wrought by warfare. So too Buba presents his subjects here as thinking, feeling and reflective beings in a manner that Gilles Deleuze once described as the position of the "seer" of a new cinema, rather than the "doer" of classical cinema.[23] Thus, an essential part of Buba's project of portraiture is to show that Braddock citizens change in relation to the camera that records them and that they practice various forms of remembering to activate a relation to space and place.

In *Voices from a Steeltown*, Buba turns his camera to historic or civic institutions that in the present moment carry scars of neglect or commercial repurposing in their very architectural being. To the outside observer, such "wasted spaces" may not be worthy of more than a passing glance. The film is organized around several landmarks in particular: the Braddock library, the Braddock High School, and the Buba family farm.[24]





The Carnegie Free Library of Braddock.



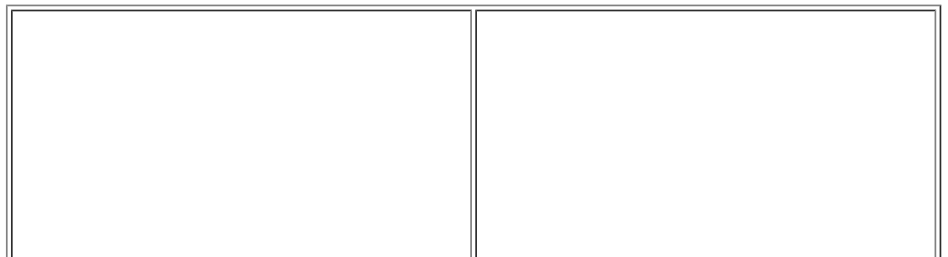
The Edgar Thomson Steel Works.

In the film's most significant sequence, we are taken to Braddock High School. A group of black youths wander through the tall grass around the back of the former school, which has been sealed and condemned for only two years but which now seems like a place haunted by ghosts. Before thrusting us into the darkened building, the film gives us a montage of historic news clippings celebrating the accomplishments of Braddock football and other sports teams. As if nodding to his previous work, *To My Family*, which presented his grandfather's repair store through idealized advertising images before showing the space derelict and ready for demolition, here Buba similarly uses a before/after editing technique. He shows how the school was remembered (given a rose-tinted glow through newspaper headlines and joyous sports commentary from decades past) then shows in real time how it functions today as an abandoned space.

After wandering over tall grass, a group of five or six children lead the film crew to an opening in the fence where they enter and access the building through the side on the upper floor. The cameraman enters a darkened doorway. In the next shot, we see the children laughing and standing about in an empty hallway. Only sunlight illuminates the children's silhouettes; behind them, the building remains too dark to see, illegible. According to one child: "It [the high school] was so nice, but everybody messed it up now. 1981, it was all nice; 1982, look at it. It's all messed up."

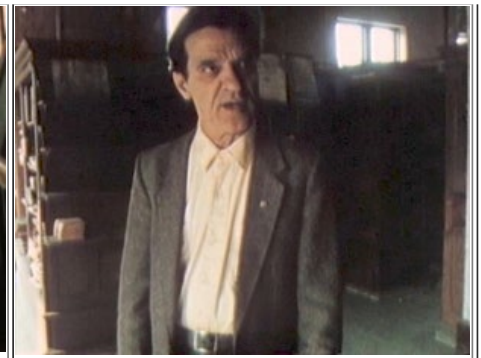
The camera takes in views of empty classrooms, torn-up wallpaper, broken windows, and a desolate scene of a classroom with its windows smashed in and a single chair and desk isolated in the center. On the soundtrack, we hear polka music, a sonic counterpoint to the grim imagery and a nod to the East European immigrants who settled there. Buba shows another news clipping of the historic sports teams, then in a wide shot zooms out to show the entrance of Braddock High School. Its regal faceplate and neoclassical archway contrasts sharply with the rows of broken windows that face the streets outside.

The window frame, again, serves as a symbolic device for Buba. As in *To My Family* the closed window overlooking his mother's backyard provided an occasion for an involuntary memory, in *Voices From a Steeltown* the image of a broken window similarly triggers a sentimental attachment to the past. The school once carried forward a sense of pride in the town. It exists now as a crossroads where two temporalities, two generations of residents, co-exist but do not ever meet in mutual recognition. This time, when Buba's camera looks outside a window, it only shows more broken windows.





Children take us on a tour inside the recently closed Braddock High School.



A librarian discusses the history of the Carnegie Free Library of Braddock. From *Voices from a Steeltown*.



Buba states he grew up “standing on the street corner.” A photographic portrait from his youth shows him doing just that, decades ago. *Voices from a Steeltown*.

Like Buba’s *To My Family*, *Voices from a Steeltown* is especially concerned with geopsychic space. In *Steeltown*, Buba asks his subjects to give him tours of formerly significant spaces of industrial production or civic spaces that have become ruins (such as the library). Here the choice is to hand over the film, figuratively speaking, to the Braddock-resident-cum-tour-guide. This role causes the Braddock citizens very quickly to alternate from an empirical description of the site to a more memory-driven and imaginative conception of what the space means to them personally. Mental spaces of memory and material spaces of history collide. In turn, the viewer shuttles back and forth from the speaker’s imagination and the physical environment that surrounds him/her.

This method, of course, is one we first witnessed in Buba’s *To My Family*, where Buba’s conversation with his mother in his Braddock home is momentarily, but powerfully, interrupted by his point-of-view involuntary recollection of his grandfather’s repair shop. *Voices of a Steeltown* brings us full circle. Instead of an interior journey into one’s own mind (formally constituted as a montage), Buba here evolves that conceit by broadening his canvas. He provides a series of itineraries with a diverse cast of Braddock residents, whose testimonials bring the space to life. In effect, while they tour the city, they also tour the psychology of their own minds. Likewise, while they contrast how the facilities were used historically versus their current non-use, they perform a critique of urban geography under the conditions of neoliberal life. This is Buba as both self-portraitist and psychogeographer of a steeltown’s unconscious.

Buba’s meta-portrait film, by the end, does not offer any consciousness-raising resolution, nor does Buba explicitly politicize issues of labor struggle. Nevertheless, a political dimension to the project emerges. He allows the film audience to be taken on a tour by diverse residents of Braddock. He alternates from black youths, to elderly individuals, to people who worked at the facilities that now lie in a state of disarray (the librarian for Andrew Carnegie’s Free Library). Buba does this to generate a dynamic, dialectical relationship with time itself, an oscillation between an evidently “dead” or wasted space and an encounter with people or objects in that space who retain the power to render it anew, if only imaginatively. In the above sections, I have tried to show that this memory-making process is at the heart of Buba’s political activity around Braddock.

Afterimages of a steeltown: conclusion

A familial gaze is clearly at work in Buba’s filmmaking: the presence of child-like characters who reflect on family; the appearance of private/public landmarks in various states of decomposition; the use of familiar, recurring characters; and the framing of multiple residents in group-shots which suggests an affinity between them. However, the reliance on familial images in the *Braddock Chronicles* is not aimed at a fantasy of harmony, ideological closure or continuity. His point is to

show deindustrialization never ends but is an ongoing reality, one that changes people and families as they, too, change.



Betty's Café Corner, 1976, is a portrait film about a "family" of unemployed steelworkers who spend their days at the local bar.



We see bar owner Betty caring for the patrons as she would her own.



The intimacy of the bar resembles that of a home more than a place of business.



In spite of the economic precarity they face in Braddock, the portrait makes explicit the connectivity, nostalgia, and playfulness of the patrons.

With few exceptions, the filmmaker refrained from overt political statements. Buba has been criticized in this regard, notably in John Hess's review of *Voices from a Steeltown* in *JUMP CUT* no. 31. As Hess points out, in a largely favorable review of the film, Buba is different from other left-wing documentarians who made working-class images in the 1970s, such as Ross Devenish's *Do Something!*, 1970, or Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA*, 1976. Namely, there is a lack of radicalism or any didacticism whatsoever in Buba's work. This is problematic because, without giving his own authorial explanation for what is happening, Buba potentially leads viewers to misunderstand deindustrialization. Hess states,

"[B]y foregoing any commentary, spoken or otherwise, Buba forgoes the opportunity to clarify what happened. He does not choose among the people's explanations or appear to favor any individuals in the film. He makes no effort to offer his own explanation of what happened or what might be done. He consistently remains dependent on what his subjects say. The result reflects their confusion. People have their various theories, but there is no way for us, the viewers, to assess these theories."

This criticism is understandable but misses the point. As discussed in the opening section of this essay, I argue it is most profitable to view Buba's films as photo albums, home movies, or forms of filmic portraiture concerned with family. Along these lines, Hirsch warns that there is always the risk that images of family will obliterate historical understanding in place of a normative and sentimentalized notion of imaginary cohesion, detached from the vicissitudes of sociocultural change or the complexity of reality itself. Family images are, more often than not,

ideologically conservative. But in saying that Buba focuses too much on the personal instead of the political, that he allows his subjects to speak and theorize too much, that he is in essence “too close” to his subjects (too familial or intimate toward them), Hess fails to see the progressive potential inherent in creating images of family. At no point does he step back and ask why Buba might find it valuable to shape his films through familial connections at this precise moment of crisis, at a time when newspapers in Pittsburgh are literally applauding the demise of the manufacturing sector and calling for people to forget about steel-making and move on.[26] Without noticing the considerable lack of attention in the mass media to how families experience deindustrialization and cope with it, is it any wonder that Hess fails to recognize the restorative power of sentimentalism, nostalgia, and the desire for familial connection as a way of coping with the destruction of working-class communities?

Putting family front and center is a way of capturing fragments of memory and historical specificity that would be invisible otherwise. The idea of family, both as a visual subject and as a mode of address to the audience, enables a different way of relating, distinct from an overtly politicized discourse that frames experience in dichotomized terms of the oppressed and the oppressor. Adopting the perspective of familial imagery on U.S. deindustrialization asks the viewer to empathize first and foremost, to see what they (on screen) see, to remember what they remember, *with them*. The audience is encouraged to relate to the Other on an immediate and intersubjective level, rather than to compartmentalize people by class, gender, race, or sexuality while seeking out abstract cause-and-effect explanations of economic change and decline. Like the poster-portrait of Sal Carulli with which I opened this essay, the viewer of Buba’s films is implicitly invited to look and stay awhile. To linger with the person or place and know them within a domain of affect, memory, and loss. In contrast, the compulsive desire for explanation (as if that will help anyone directly affected) quickly takes us away from the ordinary people who are being impacted by forces outside their control. We very easily forget them.

Indeed, Buba rejected political analysis and instead found it more effective to create dense, shifting temporal relationships with people and landmarks of the place he called home. Moreover, the film portraits draw upon the medium’s photographic basis as a memorializing technology, its implicit association with “that-has-been.” Film and photography excel as art forms of visual immediacy. Non-Braddock residents — viewers — all over the world were thus given an opportunity to envision life in this little town with the filmmaker as though they knew it themselves.

Buba’s investigative relation to “geopsychic” space, his camera’s searching approach to the optical unconscious of his documentary subjects, and his child-like reverence to the places and people of Braddock’s past, all make him a key figure in Pittsburgh film history. Buba, much like “New Documentarians” of the 1970s and 1980s like Michael Moore, made possible a form of filmmaking that was both memorializing and politicizing. But perhaps more than any other filmmaker, his films operating together in an intertextual web function as a kind of cognitive mapping of de-industrial United States, a form of history-making from below.

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Notes

1. For further discussion of mass media images of Rust Belt deindustrialization, see Allen Dieterich-Ward, *Beyond Rust: Metropolitan Pittsburgh and the Fate of Industrial America* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania, 2016): 215-223.
2. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA, 1997).
3. For a comparative analysis of Buba and Moore as practitioners of a postmodern attitude toward documentary truth and conventionality, see Louise Spence's "Working-Class Hero: Michael Moore's Authorial Voice and Persona," *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol 43.2 (2010): 368 – 380.
4. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997): 57.
5. There have been a number of recent documentaries that adopt a familial gaze to make sense of the experience of being undocumented in the U.S., including *Llevate Mis Amores* (2014) about women living in La Patrona, a Mexican village, who help give food and water to migrants traveling by freight train to the United States; or the Oscar-winning short film *Inocente* (2012) about a homeless, 15-year-old undocumented girl who creates art to imagine a better future for herself and to create a new "family," an identity of her own.
6. See Don Hopey, "Roll 'em: Films set here capture milltowns' plight," *The Pittsburgh Press*, March 24, 1985, A1, A30-31; and Cathy D. Miller, "Braddock's Skag: Film Maker Tony Buba," *Pittsburgh New Sun*, February 21, 1980, 2.
7. Guiliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (London: Verso, 2002): 253.
8. Linda Blackaby, a film programmer in Philadelphia, named his films "The Braddock Chronicles" when he visited in the mid-1970s; the name has stuck ever since. Personal interview with Tony Buba, Pittsburgh, June 14, 2016.
9. Jim Duffy, "Filmmaker Tony Buba's Portrait-Type Documentary," *Pittsburgh New Sun*, April 17, 1980.
10. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997): 11.
11. Program notes, "Tony Buba in person," *Identities & Obsessions: Department of Film and Video*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Thursday March 12, 1998, 1.
12. Having to wash walls is also a subtle reference to the reality of living in an industrial town with pollution. Many thanks to Chuck Kleinhans for pointing this out.
13. "Artists Record the Death of the Mill's Way of Life," *The New York Times*, July

1, 1985. <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/01/us/artists-record-the-death-of-the-mill-s-way-of-life.html>

14. As film reviewer Pat Politano noted, six months after the completion of Buba's portrait film, *Betty's Corner Café*, the elderly bar owner retired and passed away. See Politano, "Braddock streets provide fodder for films," *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Dec 31, 1980, 54.

15. The co-existence of these portraits, in a single viewing, had significant intertextual effects. As Buba states: "I wanted to make each film work as a short film. But then, I wanted to them to show together as a long piece, so each one was short but then also it shows as a big long structure. You watch them age. You watch Nataka get older. You watch me get older. You see them all aging through this process until we're dead." Quoted in personal interview with Tony Buba, Pittsburgh, June 14, 2016.

16. Hirsch, 2.

17. Schneider, 43.

18. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011): 8.

19. Bruno, 253.

20. Hirsch, 8.

21. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, NY: Hill & Wang, 1982).

22. Hirsch, 9.

23. In positioning himself and others as a character who sees, but does not act, one whose main activity is to think the past, Buba evokes the Deleuzian "seer" of the time-image, identified with Italian neorealist films of the postwar period. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: Athlone, 1989): 73.

24. Andrew Carnegie was a Scottish-American industrialist and one of the richest Americans ever. He was a philanthropist who gave several "gifts" to the workers he employed in his factories, in the form of civic spaces. The Carnegie Library in Braddock, established in 1889 to serve the employees of the steel mill, temporarily closed in the 1970s due to dilapidated condition and lack of funding. A community effort reopened the library in the mid-1980s. Braddock High closed in 1981. The Buba family farmed nearly 100 acres until WWII. Today, a Giant Eagle grocery store sits there.

25. Hess, "Voices from a Steeltown: Fighting for community," *JUMP CUT: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 31 (March 1986): 43.
<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC31folder/VoicesSteeltown.html>

26. In 1985, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* published a widely criticized editorial which suggested that the population loss of 40,000 residents among towns in the Mon Valley should be seen as "a blessing that should be accepted and built upon." See *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "No Growth a Blessing", lead editorial, May 29, 1985: 8.

Between Neighborhoods: documentary art, audiovisual scholarship, and public humanities

by [Joshua Glick](#) in conversation with [Seth Fein](#)

Introduction

by Joshua Glick

Since its creation for the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair, the Unisphere has surfaced time and time again in the background of commercial film and television. The gigantic steel armillary located in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Queens is used for establishing shots in works ranging from music videos (Cyndi Lauper’s *Hey Now*) to sitcoms (*The King of Queens*), Hollywood features (*Men in Black*), and advertisements for the U.S. Open. While the Unisphere has become synonymous with the borough, the way it has been depicted in popular culture habitually ignores its origins and symbolic identity. In filmmaker and audiovisual historian Seth Fein’s award-winning experimental documentary, [Between Neighborhoods](#) (2017), the Unisphere takes center stage, not simply as an aesthetic object to be admired for its impressive design and scale, but as a prism to explore the transnational history and contemporary social geography of Queens. [1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

I first met Fein as a graduate student at Yale University, where I audited his undergraduate seminar titled *Film and History*. We continued to keep in touch about our shared interests in media history and filmmaking, even as I later moved to Little Rock, Arkansas to teach Film & Media Studies courses at Hendrix College, and Fein began teaching in a Screen Studies program at Brooklyn College’s [Feinstein Graduate School of Cinema](#) and founded the studio [Seven Local Film](#). What began as a post-screening talk back for *Between Neighborhoods* at the [New Haven Documentary Film Festival](#) in June 2017, extended to a series of conversations about the documentary as well as his current projects.



We chatted in many of the locales that appear throughout *Between Neighborhoods*: the cafes and restaurants in Elmhurst and Fein’s home neighborhood of Jackson Heights, the bustling sidewalks that line the path of the elevated 7 Train, and the plaza that surrounds the Unisphere itself. Mobilizing a rich archive of newsreels, television programs, photographs, and recorded speeches from politicians and civic figures, Fein examines the ways through which authoritarian planner (and World’s Fair architect) Robert Moses attempted to make Queens the center for the New York City metropolitan region consisting of city, outerboroughs, and suburbs interlinked through highways and bridges. As imagined by Moses, the Unisphere constituted the focal point of both the Fair and the expanded urban-suburban territory.[2] At the same time, *Between Neighborhoods* investigates the Unisphere’s connection to the federal government’s neoimperial mission, following the modernization theory of W.W. Rostow, to selectively “develop” the industrial economies, urban infrastructures, and technocratic governments of Third World nations for the benefit of the United States.[3]

Between Neighborhoods’ diptych design creatively excavates a little known aspect of the borough’s past. It also juxtaposes scenes of Queens from the 1960s with the borough today in a new global age and the presidency of Donald Trump. And yet, *Between Neighborhoods* offers no drive-by tourist’s gaze, no quick snapshots of the “sights and sounds” of the street. Fein’s nonfiction practice resonates with how filmmakers Thom Andersen, Agnès Varda, and Bill Morrison investigate the deep history of cultural landscapes, probing the multifold relationships that exist between the lived present and remembered past of a place. In *Between Neighborhoods*, contemporary observational video captures the flurry of activity around the Unisphere, showing minority residents of Queens (many of who are immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East) laying claim to the area.

Scholar Dolores Hayden notes that urban landscapes are “storehouses” for “social memories” that can be activated to cultivate a more inclusive public culture.[4] *Between Neighborhoods* portrays parts of Queens’ geography in similar terms, helping viewers understand the fraught origins of the Unisphere and how it has been reinterpreted as a monument to contemporary Queens and the immigrants who call the borough home. In recent decades, the plaza surrounding the Unisphere has functioned as a skate park, date spot, playground, and performance stage. More broadly, *Between Neighborhoods* examines the residential enclaves and commercial districts of Jackson Heights, Woodside, Elmhurst, Corona, and Flushing as vibrant, mixed-class, multi-racial

communities. They give individuals and families important structures of affiliation and belonging in the form of religious institutions, health care clinics, shopping centers, schools, and arts organizations. In the documentary, vernacular culture (parades in particular) and local demonstrations serve as forms of resistance against encroaching gentrification, the privatization of public space, and repressive immigration policies and discriminatory policing.[5]

Between Neighborhoods has enjoyed a robust exhibition run. It has been screened at film festivals, such as the [Queens World Film Festival](#) where it won the Founders Choice award in 2017, as well as at universities in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. Additionally, it was shown at community institutions such as the Latino immigrant rights organization [Make the Road New York](#) in Bushwick and has been installed for extended periods of time at CUNY Graduate Center in Manhattan and at Queens College's Art Center Gallery. College campuses have provided a fitting home for *Between Neighborhoods* as the project emerged out of Fein's scholarship about audiovisual cultures in the Americas, especially film and television between Mexico and the U.S. between the Depression and the Cold War. As a professor of History, American Studies, Latin American Studies and Film at Yale his graduate and undergraduate teaching positioned audiovisual culture as central to the interdisciplinary analysis of transnationalism. As he wrote in his article "Culture Across Borders in the Americas" for *History Compass* (2003), "The cultural turn in international and transnational history has not abdicated the study of power but has intensified the scholar's need to problematize and define what power and culture are." [6] In Fein's *Film and History* seminar, we looked at both films made in the 1930s and how the decade has since been depicted on screen. Our case studies animated theoretical questions regarding historical representation as a process of selection and omission indelibly influenced by the sociopolitical forces of the present.



Seth Fein at work in his studio in Jackson Heights. Photograph by Joshua Glick.

More recently, Fein's move from interdisciplinary writing to documentary contributes to a larger movement in which cinema, communications, and media studies departments at universities around the U.S. are collapsing the boundaries between traditional scholarship and filmmaking. Special programs of various emphases and curricula at universities such as Duke, George Washington, and the University of California, Santa Cruz share an interest in critical studies, nonfiction production, and social engagement. They see documentary not simply as a means for creating "awareness" of a pressing issue, but as a form of artful analysis and advocacy.[7] Fein talked about his documentary practice when he workshopped an early iteration of what became *Between Neighborhoods* (titled *Outerspace Innerborough*) with my *Cinema and New York City* summer seminar at Columbia University in 2014. Our conversation helped students to better understand the possibilities of documentary as an interpretive craft, in this case foregrounding the central role of audiovisual media in shaping Cold War New York, as well as the global identity of modern-day Queens.

Fein's current project, [Our Neighborhood](#), builds on, but is distinct from, *Between Neighborhoods*' exploration of how the Cold War was waged through transnational culture. *Our Neighborhood* concentrates on the U.S. government's TV propaganda in Latin America in the 1960s. Now in production, the documentary looks at the U.S. attempt to contain the Cuban Revolution by broadcasting liberal modernization as an alternative to socialist revolution. Towards this end, the government was invested in a wide spectrum of genres, ranging from telenovelas, dramatic series, news programs and educational talk shows. The film also includes original interviews with United States Information Agency and Latin American talent as well as dramatizations based on research drawn from documents obtained through Fein's Freedom of Information Act request.



Poster for Fein's new documentary, in production, about Washington's small-screen counter-insurgency against the Cuban Revolution across Latin America in the 1960s



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Between Neighborhoods: Conversation between Seth Fein and Joshua Glick



Between Neighborhoods operates almost entirely in split-screen as in the above screenshot (80:40) from its conclusion where Zenén Zeferino Huervo of Veracruz sings his ballad about Queens at Terraza 7 in Elmhurst, [click for clip](#). Seth Fein produced the screenshots and clips that illustrate his answers. Captions cite timecodes for screenshots and, in many instances, provide links to associated clips. Audiovisual media from *Between Neighborhoods* is for viewing via *Jump Cut* 58, all rights reserved Seth Fein, Seven Local Film, 2018.

Joshua Glick: Your documentary, *Between Neighborhoods* (81 mins., Seven Local Film, 2017), has evolved into at least three distinct installments. The newest iteration was awarded the Founder's Choice prize at the [Queens World Film Festival](#). What is the origin of *Between Neighborhoods*?

Seth Fein: My initial response is that I live in Queens. I moved there as I was moving from writing about film to making film. And *Between Neighborhoods* is the culmination of my thinking about and doing history across my career, which compelled my move from print to video. My ambition has always been to juxtapose different temporalities, different primary sources, forms of media, and most of all to explore the ability of art not only to engage but to analyze. Working in video has allowed me to redeploy my archival research by creating directly on the screen rather than writing about it, to explore new ideas through evocative editing rather than narrative description. *Between Neighborhoods*' development across iterations has increasingly moved in this direction—even as it has grown in duration from about 40 minutes to about 80—by jettisoning voiceover, moving from single-screen to split-screen, limiting titling to conceptually and visually evocative key words, direct quotation, and strategic exposition. *Between Neighborhoods* expresses transhistorically the intersections of immigration and imperialism, urban and international political economy, to provoke thoughts about what is history, where is it, how is it made, to show that it is not something uncovered from the past but created now in the present, by the filmmaker (as by the historian) and then again by the spectator. Unisphere, *Between Neighborhoods*' principal subject, presented an opportunity to relate multiple histories at once through documentary art.

Glick: In the film, the Unisphere is such a prominent symbol and subject of analysis. How did this colossal structure become so central to the project?

Fein: *Between Neighborhoods* developed from my own fascination with the Unisphere and my recognition that it could tell stories, histories, about which I had long studied. I understood it in terms of the ideologies that built it, the global as well as regional vision it propagated, and also the different-but-related world that surrounds it today, on the ground in Queens and globally as political economy. It offered a way to work between present and past and to consolidate my scholarly tools and my artistic ambitions around a single object, to visualize expansively historical fields that were otherwise invisible.

I had encountered Unisphere across my life, but saw it differently when I, a Brooklyn native, returned to live in NYC, in Queens, as I began to make documentaries. Robert Moses, president of the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair Corporation commissioned US Steel to build the giant globe, the biggest in the world, as his Fair's theme center and its only intended permanent structure in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park (FMCP), where, of course, it still stands. While I was shooting another documentary, at Kissena Park's Velodrome (also built by Moses) in Queens—about the mainly male but interethnic, interracial, and international subculture of radio-control car enthusiasts—I would stop on my way home on my bike to look at Unisphere during Summer sundowns.

I became fascinated with two things: the beauty of the changing light on Unisphere as the day ended and the robust social life around it, which reminded me of Breughel paintings, both by the elder and the younger, their scenes of everyday social life and recreation across the seasons swirling through public space. The world around Moses's mammoth stainless-steel armillary effortlessly projected the diversity of Queens (kind of like the Velodrome but with even greater social breadth and topological splendor).

Accordingly, I ran a camera without moving it and then when logging the footage at Barnard, where I was teaching then, I was struck both by its beauty and how it affected other filmmakers working nearby. I started to use this footage in the course that I created at Barnard, *Projecting American Empire on Film*. I thought with my students about the imperial ideologies that surrounded Unisphere's construction. By intercutting my Unisphere footage with clips from my archival research (especially from propaganda films produced transnationally by Washington for the Third World in the 1960s), we explored how the world in New York City had through the other side of imperialism, immigration, remade the city. Queens, more than Manhattan where my course met, had become its most cosmopolitan borough. In working with my footage of Unisphere and my archival video research, I was able to fulfill another mission of the class: to explore how film could do history, innovatively, artfully and provocatively, transgressing disciplines, genres, historiographies, and temporalities. I was working out without realizing it the ideas that would become *Between Neighborhoods*. It also led to new archival research about Unisphere, which I thought I would use to write but that became primary materials for my film, whether or not they display directly in it, as many do.

The more psychoanalytic answer is that Unisphere had been dancing around my unconscious for decades, maybe. It and I are the same age. My parents told me that they took me to the NYWF when I was a baby. I looked at Unisphere again, as a Brooklyn immigrant to Queens, as I reconnected my life and work, from film historian to filmmaker. I told a story about this at the Moth (the video is linked to my own webpage on sevenlocalfilm.com). It is notable that unlike me Unisphere has not visibly aged, over the last fifty years, but as *Between Neighborhoods* shows, its meanings have changed; the dissonance between that geophysical sameness and geosocial differences only more profoundly illuminates historical contrasts across time. Perhaps as I was in a moment of personal and professional transition, I related to those transitions around Unisphere, that orbit the

armillary's own orbits, and that I connected both to the work I had been doing for years and the work I wanted to do, which Unisphere allowed me to do, or better said, compelled me to do.

Glick: What inspired the diptych approach for *Between Neighborhoods*?

Fein: It emerged from my interest in transhistorical analysis and expression: bringing different temporalities together in my writing about crossborder film cultures, viewing historymaking as a creative opportunity to connect authoritatively and provocatively (only) seemingly disparate research to explain things about present and past that could not otherwise be seen. As often is the case, others can convincingly connect the dots better than artists themselves can. Accordingly, when *Between Neighborhoods* screened in Cambridge University, Julia Guarneri, a professor of history there, introduced it by recalling how I taught with multimedia when she was a teaching fellow in my *International History of the United States in the Twentieth Century* lecture course at Yale. In fact, *Between Neighborhoods* grew in form from what I began there, especially playing different film clips simultaneously alongside and intercut with each other.

It's a way of viewing how texts cohabitate and travel between varied cultural fields across different temporalities, to contrast the meaning of the same text in different contexts, which is really the work of both the historian and the documentary artist in the here and now. For me, this was the beginning of making history through video art. But it also was the beginning of my awareness of how I could achieve better in audiovisual practice what my research inspired methodologically but that my writing could not well enough effect: putting different cultural fields into conversation with one another to make better history by producing documentary art. It was not simply a matter of illustrating lectures or quoting directly my film and TV research by showing it rather than describing it, as I did in my scholarship but transcending via video to express what print historiography could neither adequately analyze nor explain.

My interest was in multichannel visual expression. Pragmatism produced the single-channel, split-screen diptych. I had an initial idea to make *Between Neighborhoods* as a triptych, since I liked the idea of transcending binaries as well as referencing the theme of threes, on which *Between Neighborhoods* meditates: three orbits around Unisphere, the era's geopolitical notion of three worlds, and its echo among city, outerborough, and suburb in Moses's tripartite empire.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (16:13) [Click for clip.](#)

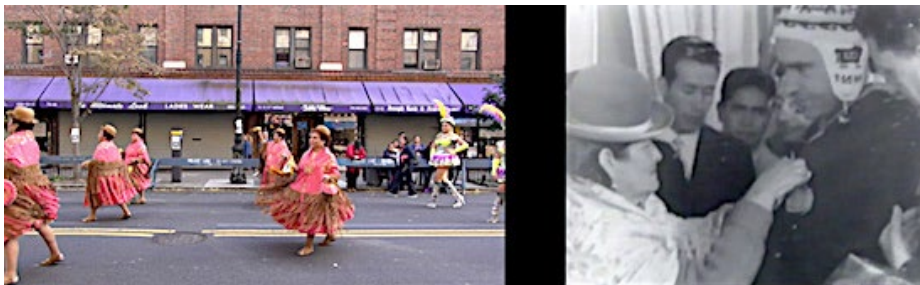
But it would have been very difficult to edit and almost impossible to exhibit large enough, without a prior commitment from an exhibition space dedicated to the project's scale. Since *Between Neighborhoods* intends to be immersive, and having a split screen already reduces the size of each frame, it needs significant space to project properly. I should add that some of my close and very skilled professional filmmaker friends, protectively discouraged not just the triptych but the diptych as too complex conceptually and technically for this project, as I ventured into its production alone and especially as it grew in duration. Their good sense both tempered my technical ambition but also reinforced my

conceptual dedication to multiframe representation. A lack of expertise nurtured experimentation (a nice word for it) and enforced limits. The outcome satisfied me (as well as them).

As with any writing or filmmaking or other compositional endeavor, deciding on limits, in this case two frames, allows for greater creativity within those boundaries. Also, as one of my filmmaking friends said about the dual-screen format: we are bioptic animals, watching two frames at once is more graspable than three (or more). I think that's true, not only for comprehension but contemplation. However, I imagine another iteration with a constant third frame or channel of Unisphere in real time across the length of the artdoc as well as other forms of multiscreen installation that would not presume fixed frontal viewing.

A key “rule” for the diptych's composition derived from combined concern about conceptual commitments and formal limits. In its juxtapositional, split-screen editing of observational and archival footage, the present (observational footage) always projects on the left and the past (archival footage) always on the right, to destabilize a conventional causality, a linear left-right reading from past to present. This de-ordering foregrounds the work of the filmmaker, of the historian, in creating the past presently by positioning the viewer in resistance to diachronic documentary and historiographic conventions. Such positioning undermines not simply linearity but also the analysis of single events, individuals, discourses, or structures, to focus instead on the synchronic friction the diptych creates between them.

One of the places this happens in *Between Neighborhoods* is its pairing of my footage of the 2016 iteration of the annual Bolivian Independence Day Parade each October through Jackson Heights with archival footage of the parade through La Paz celebrating Vice President Richard Nixon's state visit to Bolivia in 1958. It connects my observational filming of the transnational present just around the corner from my home with research about the international past of U.S. empire, represented by and through this Bolivian newsreel secretly subsidized by Washington.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (40:59)

The parallel parades expressing *Between Neighborhoods*' transhistorical equation between immigration and imperialism culminate by segueing to a sequence that operates between Corona, Unisphere's neighborhood, a center of Mexican immigration to NYC today, and Mexico City, site of an Alliance for Progress-era state visit by Jack and Jackie Kennedy in 1962. The transnational present and the international past interact across cinematic and interamerican neighborhoods. JFK endorsed the modernizing mission of Mexico's authoritarian state-party (the PRI) headed by President López Portillo, as an exemplar of liberal modernization, a United States in the making. In doing so, Washington's counter-Castro invoked the Good Neighborhood—the twentieth-century rhetoric that expressed the interamerican imperial discourse that created Washington's Western Hemisphere for two centuries—but does not extend between

neighborhoods, to Latin Americans in the United States. The international and the transnational, neoliberal reality and liberal imperialism transhistorically confront each other, across borders, between neighborhoods.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (41:48) [Click for clip.](#)

In bringing together the international and the transnational history of Jackson Heights and La Paz, Corona and Mexico City, of imperialism and immigration, these sequences also unite the present and past of my own career, now as a filmmaker and in the past as a film historian. Evoking the history generated *between* neighborhoods, if you will, temporalities converse across time and place within an imagined space that transcends each, not to tell the story of either the Jackson Heights or La Paz parade, nor of Corona or Mexico City as imperial destinations but to suggest another journey back and forth between them, one which also charts my travels from writing about audiovisual culture to producing it.

Glick: The two New York-based mid-century World's Fairs served as showcases for moving image innovation. The RCA Pavilion at the New York World's Fair in 1939 introduced television to a mass audience. And the IBM Pavilion at the New York World's Fair in 1964–5 featured a variety of elaborate small and large screen displays. Were you using the audio-visual grammar of the World's Fair to critique or interrogate it?

Fein: That's a very interesting observation. And I'm gratified that *Between Neighborhoods* prompts this association, because the work considers audiovisual communications, Unisphere's key theme, as central instrument as well as sign of U.S. empire's ideology of progress through technological modernization. *Between Neighborhoods'* archival research includes examples of small-screen as well as large-screen propaganda sponsored by Washington to sell U.S. progress across the Third World and by the NYWF Corp. and US Steel to promote the Fair as part of that outerborough/Third World mission. That I cannot say that I was intentionally citing the prior Fair's small-screen exhibits (of which I am very aware) does not diminish the power of your association, since the spectator ultimately produces art, just as I think the artist works on different levels of consciousness. In that regard, your insight prompts my memory of a multiscreen, multimedia presentation about the 1939 Fair, by Bill Stott, great scholar of Depression-era visual culture, when I was a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. Stott was definitely using the form to mediate between his talk and the past it considered. So, who knows?

Glick: How do you research, locate, assess, and assemble so many different kinds of media? Is your process of creating a documentary similar to writing an academic article or book?

Fein: Let me take the second part first. It's less like academic writing than creative writing. It's more like an essay, not an academic article but an essay that uses tone, form, and evocation to examine, explain, and instigate. A documentary is different too from academic writing, but really what drives this project is using audiovisual art to make points about all sorts of things that an academic work

could not do because of the limits of that type of writing as well as the limits of writing, period. Or to put it differently, it attempts what I wanted my writing to do.

The artdoc freed me from the social and expressive confines of the professional expectations about what “scholarship” should look like in order to better pursue scholarly objectives. Correspondingly, its differences from a more conventional history documentary are as notable as how it diverges from conventional, single-story historiography. Though, I should add that *Between Neighborhoods* involves onscreen writing, which demands composing and editing prose—its key-word transitions and its epigraphic meditations as well as direct quotations—in rhythm with documentary sounds and images, mindful of the graphic look of words and their sounds’ poetics and phonetics. I love doing this writing (some of which projects in the clips I’ve linked).

There *are*, however, a couple of ways in which making the artdoc is exactly like writing from research. First, once I start editing, the ideas begin to take off, no matter what the outline is, putting it together generates unanticipated insights and objectives. The other is that I had better get those ideas down, into a sequence, or they will disappear. I can make a list of things I need to tweak but the big ideas about what to represent and how to do it, need to be done right away, when it’s fresh. Logging my own footage, especially the dozens of hours I shot of Unisphere, presented many challenges, because it was not explicitly evident where it would fit in the work. I tagged it for things it made me think of conceptually, like modernization or immigration or imperialism or fascism or religion, and also for connections to archival footage or prior footage shot by me that I realize as I look at it I want to connect. This is *not* different than for any other filmmaker, but the diptych generates a highly dynamic and sometimes beyond-mind-boggling set of creative criteria. So the opportunity and challenge is to identify both what is there in the footage but also imagine how I intend to use it, not necessarily narratively, more like an abstract collage.

One of the most important archival finds for me—audio tapes of NYWF meetings and press conferences and events at which Moses and others said things not said anywhere else—presented particular challenges for organization and for editing. I had to keyword the digital files I obtained of these voices very carefully because I could not scrub through them to see what I might have missed (visual cues are easier to locate than audio ones). At the same time, it created creative opportunities to juxtapose sounds and sights.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (26:31) [Click for clip.](#)

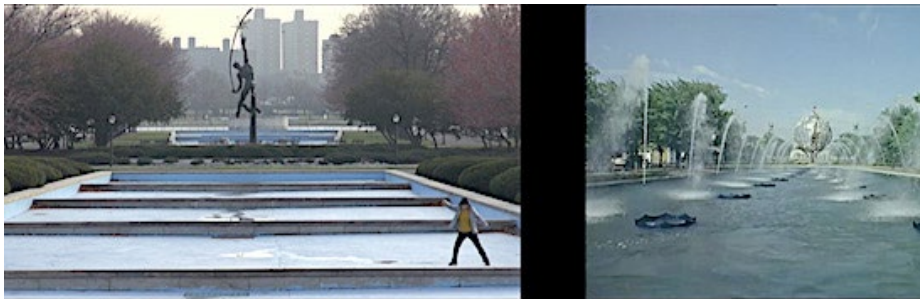
For my shooting of Unisphere across recent years, at different times in different seasons, it became really complicated to organize what I shot, to indicate rationally how it could connect with other archival or original footage (I shot of other things). Then there was the dilemma of how to use so much of this observational footage of a single object. For example, because I wanted to capture a sunrise at Unisphere I went out there before dawn in the dead of winter and ran the camera from a fixed spot for hours facing west, catching the sun coming up

behind me, in front of Unisphere, and the light changing around and on it. I would have loved to project this in realtime, kind of like Warhol's *Empire*, and as a constant channel in a multichannel installation. (In fact, in *outerspace innerborough*, *Between Neighborhoods*' single-frame precursor, I played a scene intermittently in realtime, intercut with the other original and archival footage to suggest the different temporalities in which history happens.) I wound up using the several hours of the sunrise sped up within a couple of minutes in *Between Neighborhoods*' opening sequence.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (00:00). [Click for clip.](#)

Something unexpected happened that changed everything. As I wrapped the shoot, jumping around to keep warm, watching how the area has a specific life on a weekday morning, mainly Asian women and elderly couples speed walking around Unisphere for exercise, men crossing by it in groups, on bikes and by foot, on their way to work across the city, I noticed behind me, a woman doing Tai Chi in the dry fountain that runs east from Unisphere and that has one of the neoclassical-cum-modernist sculptures Moses commissioned for the Fair. I spun the camera around and observed her elegant moves and thought of archival photos and footage I had of that statue and that fountain and began to imagine how I would combine things, the now and the then, the resonant forms and themes, the art; it became the beginning of *Between Neighborhoods*' concluding sequence, which included new footage I subsequently shot to make it work (in the conclusion, linked above and here, below).



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (78:19). [Click for clip.](#)

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

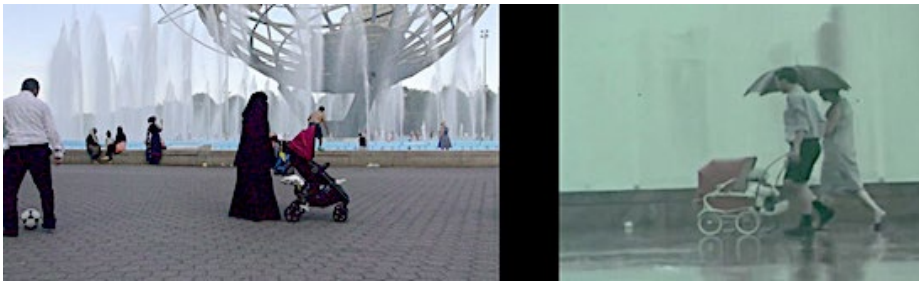
Fortunately or unfortunately, there is, for me (at least), one big difference between composing a film and writing a manuscript; I can stay at the editing of video for a very, very long time, once I'm into it—much longer than for writing. The diptych form is very exhausting but also satisfying, because I created a grammar and a method so there would be both aesthetic and thematic unity for the viewer. For example, as I mentioned (and show) above, when I relate original to archival material, the original (my footage of now) goes on the left and the archival material (my footage of the then) goes on the right to disrupt the usual left-to-right, past-to-present sequencing of events. And in the many segments where there is a synchronic dialogue between the then and the now, I connected my own footage only after I had the archival material more-or-less in place, establishing a structure within which to maneuver. While *Between Neighborhoods* does not have chapters, I did conceive of it as a series of (musical) movements, discrete conceptual sections with their own themes and rhythms, comprised of shorter sequences that I isolated to work out the diptych's dyadic compositions.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (06:21). [Click for clip.](#)

Glick: The World's Fair in general and the Unisphere in particular constitute multi-dimensional symbols in *Between Neighborhoods*. As represented in the documentary, the Fair is a place where politicians, urban planners, and everyday people imagined the future of Queens, America, as well as the geopolitical position of the country in the world. How did Moses's visions circa the mid-1960s differ from present-day understandings of globalization and the on-the-ground social reality of Queens?

Fein: Well, that's really what *Between Neighborhoods* is about: how the Fair used Flushing Meadows-Corona Park to enact in practice as well as represent as ideology (embodied by Unisphere) the idea that modernization could be imposed by planners. *Between Neighborhoods* juxtaposes that idealized vision of globalization imperially imposed from above with the unintended benefit of so-called modernization's global failure to deliver its promised progress: Queens' globalization from below, by those from all over the world who live here and redefine Unisphere as an icon of crossborder socialization today.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (50:49). [Click for clip.](#)

But that is not the end of a story; it's the site of a new global struggle in Queens. *Between Neighborhoods* links the legacies of Robert Moses, metropolitan New York's master regional planner, and W.W. Rostow, imperial Washington's master international planner, promulgator of Modernization Theory that guided U.S. foreign policy across the Third World, across the Sixties, imposing infrastructure projects, including roads derived from Moses's highway building.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (11:35). [Click for clip.](#)

Between Neighborhoods shows that Moses's and Rostow's congruent imperial missions in the names of global modernization continues, constructing walls along borders rather than bring them down. This is true between the United States and the world, as Trump tries to wall off Latin American and Muslim immigration, each of which have renewed Queens. This international enclosure reproduces itself around Unisphere, where the United States Tennis Association (USTA) continues to wall off FMCP from Queens' global citizenry who use the park all year for a once-a-year, two-week corporate event, the U.S. Open (frequently attended by the publicity-mad Trump). It privatizes public land in the false names of globalization and public works.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (61:38). [Click for clip.](#)

Glick: *Between Neighborhoods* has had a rich exhibition life at festivals and university venues. Describe your ideal viewing context for the documentary. Are there different takeaways if *Between Neighborhoods* is projected in a public place, installed in a museum, or analyzed in a classroom?

Fein: It's best viewed as an installation. It has been up as an installation. Because I could not design in collaboration with a permanent exhibition space, it became

more of a film as it grew in duration. But even though I made it assuming it would mainly be viewed in an auditorium, that is split-screen on one channel; it would best be viewed now in an art space. Expectation shapes reception; there is value added to viewing *Between Neighborhoods* in a space that does not suggest a conventional doc and allows viewers to position and reposition themselves in the exhibition space, like, for example, how Bruce Conner's *Crossroads* (1976) exhibited over the last couple of years at both MoMA's retro of his career and then at the Whitney's great *Dreamlands* show on immersive video, where it was better installed because it was larger and the space was bigger, allowing for deeper immersion and concentration.

I do have a fantasy exhibition: projecting *Between Neighborhoods* large outdoors, opposite Unisphere, on the exterior of the Queens Museum, the former NYC Building built for 1939 Fair (which was the 1964-1965 NYWF Corp.'s headquarters where Moses revealed his model of Unisphere and where the Power Broker built his NYC Panorama built for that Fair, which includes a model of Unisphere. The building's inside and outside appear in my own footage (including of the Panorama, which I shot surreptitiously indoors until stopped by a guard) as well as in much of *Between Neighborhoods*' archival material.

Doing such an exhibition as a pop-up, guerilla-like happening would emphasize both the Unisphere as art and *Between Neighborhoods* as art. The doc is different than the Unisphere, it reveals things about it otherwise unseen, and that changes how one experiences the sculpture itself, which is a point that can be uniquely made by projecting *Between Neighborhoods* opposite Unisphere. I do think *Between Neighborhoods* is an event more than a straight doc for theater viewing, as it has generally been exhibited.

Glick: Do you see your project as overtly pedagogical?

Fein: No, not overtly pedagogical, and I hope not didactic! If it has a "pedagogical" dimension it's implicit and is not for me, at least, the sociological theme your question highlights but the methodological one that drove me to make *Between Neighborhoods*: how to project present and past at once, to provoke new ideas about what history is and how and where it's made. For me it's the project's design, its transhistorical form, that by demonstrating its approach encourages artist-scholars to pursue their own formal experiments to produce new history. I'd like to think that *if Between Neighborhoods* generates new ideas about U.S. empire and about Queens, they derive as much from its approach to documentary art and about the telling of history generally as from its original research.

Glick: *Between Neighborhoods* does not have one central claim, but emphasizes a number of related claims by way of rhetorically charged juxtapositions. Is there an overall framing argument that you want to convey to the viewer? Or, is there a dominant impression that you would like the viewer to come away with?

Fein: History is never one thing. It can't be best understood as a single authoritative story. It's not simply two things either, but the diptych I hope clarifies this by offering at least two things at once and also, again, hopefully, the interaction of two produces many more, and more valuable, ideas and questions (neo-Eisensteinian perhaps). The idea is neither synthesis nor chaos but dynamism and the value of considering multiple temporalities at once, to see connections otherwise invisible. Maybe the project can underline that the power of history is not (mainly) in research (which I love) but in working creatively, expansively with research, rather than reductively, showing how evocative expression is analytically powerful for the producer as well as empowering for the viewer who ultimately produces meaning. History is always made in the present, first by its teller, its historian or artist or filmmaker, but ultimately by whomever views it. This is true of *Between Neighborhoods* as it is also of Unisphere.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (72:40)

Regarding *Between Neighborhoods*' interpretation, I hope it suggests that planners, even master ones like Rostow or Moses, do not control the future, people do. Unisphere has great power and, even beauty, intensified by its redefinition by those who orbit it today, who come from all over the world that Modernization Theory did not improve to improve Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Queens, New York City, the United States, in ways that Moses did not imagine and would not have favored. *Between Neighborhoods* shows that Unisphere is the magnetic icon of a global town square, in Queens, not an outer but an *innerborough*.

Glick: When we talked about doing this interview, I asked you what books you recommend reading. Why did you suggest Marshall Berman's, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (1982)?

Fein: *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* made a profound impact on me a long time ago, long before I thought of making *Between Neighborhoods* but in ways that fundamentally shaped my thinking about Unisphere, once I focused on it. Its section on New York City places Moses's work, mainly in the Bronx (Berman's boyhood borough), in the context of modernization and modernity transatlantically as part of the history of capitalism, intellectually and materially. I think all should read the part on New York City in conjunction with the fine-grained tour de force that is Caro's more-known *Power Broker* (1974). Berman is a great thinker across continental and scholarly boundaries. His work relates ideas about the processes of modernization and progress to society and also expresses those connections in a way that I consider unconventional and artful. Both Berman's framing of Moses's works as part of a transatlantic, I would say, imperial tradition as well as his critical rather than simply muckraking analysis are very significant for mapping Moses's projects within world history rather than only NYC history.

Glick: What other writings have influenced *Between Neighborhoods*?

Fein: Two key figures for my early thinking about film as history, its mission, form, and method are the historian Robert Rosenstone, whose essays addressed it directly, and the late anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, whose writings developed the transhistorical study of public culture. Rosenstone was one of the first scholarly voices in the United States to advocate, in a number of closely connected essays, for the historical potential of film, both to transcend conventional narrative history writing as well as conventional history films. Working within the then-regnant rubric of postmodernity, he collected many of his important short writings in *Visions of the Past* (1995), which advocated film as a medium that could contribute to historical representation and analysis profoundly, not through pretended realism but through purposeful experimentalism that could profoundly critique historiography as well as relate present and past vividly.

Meanwhile Trouillot's elegant essays in *Silencing the Past* (1997) show how the

present always makes history, which is always a story, and how contemporary power relies on stories about the past, what is told and what is not. *Between Neighborhoods*, like Trouillot's work about various places and individuals, shows how Unisphere's meanings are not fixed in the past but produced in various presents. The other thing about Trouillot is the challenge he posed to historians to make public culture, not to cloister themselves in university walls and simply complain about the failed efforts of those who do.

The work of the philologist/cultural theorist Walter Dignolo, best synthesized in his *The Idea of Latin America* (2005)—about the historical relationship between imperial geocultures and geopolitics in naming space—definitely resonates in *Between Neighborhoods*. I see my project as connecting a geographical monument, Unisphere, to United States empire in the Americas and across the world in the 1960s as well as to the practices of earlier empires. Moses did this himself, as *Between Neighborhoods* shows, by linking his creation to the Eiffel Tower at the very moment when Washington's cold war imperialism followed Paris's nineteenth-century colonialism into Vietnam.

The progressive rhetoric of imperialism was not sui generis to the era of Modernization Theory and Unisphere, it was a secular variant on the place of salvation in the ideology of empire across the last 500 years, the era of globalization, as Dignolo shows. Another theme of Dignolo's, summarized by his earlier collection of essays, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000), can summarize *Between Neighborhoods*. The global designs of Robert Moses and W.W. Rostow have been undone by local histories in Queens and across the once-called Third World. Also, Dignolo's early call for scholarly transdisciplinarity, to deny rather than to simply work across border walls imposed by professional academic cultures, has inspired my scholarship as well as its expression as documentary art.

History written by anthropologists has been very influential on my thinking. In addition to Trouillot's essays, Arturo Escobar's study of Modernization Theory as imperial discourse in *Encountering Development* (1995) was foundational for historicizing the emergence of a Third World, and above all else the work of the Columbia anthropologist-historian Claudio Lomnitz, who deployed Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope in his conceptualization of the Mexico-U.S. border, directly contributed to how *Between Neighborhoods* conceives and represents Unisphere as a structure that marks place and time at once.

On this score, from a completely different direction, Edward Tufte's *Beautiful Evidence* (2006), about creating still images that convey information and interpretation effectively, engagingly, and artfully encouraged my conviction that my film research needed to be expressed audiovisually. I assigned the data-design theorist's work in my graduate research seminar in *Culture in International and Transnational Histories* at Yale to encourage Ph.D. students writing papers on their way to dissertations to think not just about using visual research but creating visual analysis.

Finally, on the subject of form, it's not a book or a film, but the [Historian's Eye](#) online documentary project, developed by my friend and former Yale colleague Matthew Frye Jacobson was a source of inspiration as multimedia history and art and as professional and personal example of the scholar-artist as practitioner of public humanities. The multimedia gallery includes his own photography documenting the Great Recession; the entire endeavor is an exemplary artdoc.

Glick: Which films have influenced you as you created *Between Neighborhoods*?

Fein: One work that has had a giant influence on my own thinking about *Between Neighborhoods*, about documentary art, is, the already mentioned, *Crossroads*

(1976) by Bruce Conner. The epochmaking video installation uses archival footage, about a literally earth-shaping event—Washington’s Crossroads H-bomb explosion that destroyed Bikini atoll—to make art; and *Crossroads*’ art makes history. It explicates the power of the United States to destroy imperially in the name of “testing,” but also how the filmmaker makes history, through formal intervention and juxtaposition. *Crossroads*’ first half shows us the explosion from various angles with sound recorded at the event; in its second half, the event plays with minimalist modernist music by Patrick Gleeson and Terry Riley. Conner’s Bicentennial work is an implicit critique of the atomic age, but the film is not determinative and unnerves the viewer by demonstrating its awesome beauty and its repositioning as art. Accordingly it does not reduce but expands as it inspires interpretation rather than directs it. Like *Crossroads*, *Between Neighborhoods* is both critical of the ideology and the geopolitics that constructed Unisphere as it also admires its beauty and, its redefinition today, from an icon of U.S. imperial globalization from above to a sign of transnational socialization from below.

Because *Between Neighborhoods* continues to evolve, but even more because, as its own analysis suggests, historical interpretation is made in the present not the past, I think it’s important to note works that did not influence my artdoc’s production but do engage its reception, its production of meaning, its future history, now. Maybe that’s the culture scholar in me speaking, but I want to mention an exemplary artdoc, I only saw after completing my project’s last edition. Bill Morrison’s *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016) is a model of historical documentary that originally and powerfully marries content and form, mobilizing original archival research to contribute to a number of fields—the histories of silent film, North America, U.S. empire, to name a few—as well as, and most importantly, film as history.

Editing of archival footage, not narration, directs beautifully formed analysis that operates on multiple levels at once, all derived from the authoritative command of historiography and audiovisual research by the filmmaker/artmaker himself. Another recent work that spoke to me was T.J. Wilcox’s *In the Air* video installation about New York history, which I saw at the (old) Whitney, when it was up in 2014. A multiscreen panorama of contemporary NYC, filmed from the artist’s studio high above Union Square, hung above the gallery floor, where viewers watch from below within its ringed screens: intermittently a different panel within the panorama would project an NYC biographical/historical sketch. Its form more than its content impressed me as a multidimensional approach to present and past, place and people.

Going back to my project’s origins as a study of Unisphere itself, I thought about it in relation to Warhol’s *Empire* (1964), which also closely observes an iconic NYC structure *in situ* in realtime. Of course, there is also uncanny synchronicity between Warhol’s study of the Empire State Building and Moses’s inauguration of Unisphere, also in 1964, as a symbol of empire, his in metropolitan New York and Rostow’s in Washington’s Third World, at a Fair commemorating NYC’s tricentennial, which marked Manhattan’s absorption by the British empire. Thinking about Warhol’s film, brings to mind another artist’s (nonvideo) work David Salle’s split-screen canvases, which long have fascinated me by doing what *Between Neighborhoods* attempts, to put different times, places, and people in (audio)visual juxtaposition.

Finally, first among theatrically released films, that definitely shaped my thinking about film, art, and history, before I thought of *Between Neighborhoods*, is Terrence Davies’s *Of Time and the City* (2008). Its originality of vision, its understanding of present and past, personal memory and visually archived history combine through artful editing to produce a hypnotically meditative memoir as essay about postwar Liverpool, the filmmaker’s hometown. I have been

thinking about this film so often for so long that I made sure to spend a day in Liverpool when I was in Manchester last Fall to screen *Between Neighborhoods*. The excursion was an unforgettable experience, walking with *Of Time and the City* in my head, Davies's voice and the old footage guided my thoughts there.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Glick: I think about Davies's documentary as transforming private memories into public history. But in your film, your own life does not seem to surface, or at least it is not directly addressed.

Fein: That's a good point. *Of Time and the City* takes its own, explicitly autobiographical, approach to examine things *Between Neighborhood* cares about: urban history and archival footage as a source of art. What inspires me most about *Of Time and the City* is Davies's originality and creativity: using art to confront present and past at once, his memories and archival footage, his poetic narration and his film's evocative composition, its enigmatically moving editing. That is, it's less his specific approach than the example of his personal vision that I find generative and, frankly, encouraging in pursuing my own approach to documentary art about a particular place.

In that regard, I must mention Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1976), which, like Davies's *Of Time and the City*, but two decades earlier, mixes the personal and the social, doing art as documentary. I'm teaching both films this semester, and as I've thought about *News from Home*, I recognize notable synergies with *Between Neighborhoods*. Akerman's juxtaposition of her mother's letters, read in voiceover, from Brussels with the filmmaker's meditative footage of bicentennial Manhattan epitomizes evocative exposition, what my diptych attempts through intercuts and crosscuts between epigraphs, key words, archival and original footage. Too, if Davies's editing of found footage connects with *Between Neighborhoods*' archival art then Akerman's unrelentingly hypnotic urban cinematography converses with my artdoc's sustained audiovisual contemplation of Unisphere and other city sites, across the river, in Queens (including a shared fixation on the subway). *News from Home* is an unintentional time-capsule that viscerally documents a particular moment in NYC, one that I lived as a kid, and with which I connect deeply now. There's a personal poignancy *News from Home* expresses synchronically across space, between Brussels and New York, as family history between Akerman and her mother (Natalia), which triggers nostalgia, not unlike Davies's plangent evocation, across time and between boroughs (Brooklyn and Queens) between me and my late father (Albert), which *Between Neighborhoods* sublimates.



Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*
(1976) screenshots: time code (left to right)
43:13, 26:35, 89:13.



Terrence Davies's *Of Time and the City* (2008) screenshots: time code (left to right) 14:27, 14:39, 53:56.

Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* and Terrence Davies's *Of Time and the City* poetically evoke time and place at once, resonating themes and tropes, including transportation, engaged by *Between Neighborhoods*' social and formal commitments. Akerman's work inevitably, if unintentionally, is an irreplaceable document of NYC in the age of the World Trade Center as well as *her* personal essay, unknowingly generating nostalgia intentionally voiced by Davies in his audiovisual essay about the Liverpool of his past. *News from Home* suggests to me how future viewers of *Between Neighborhoods* might well see in it not only the past its archival footage documents but also the past its original footage records about NYC, especially Queens.

It occurs to me that many historical documentaries I did not like trenchantly influenced *Between Neighborhoods*, including ones about film history I consulted on and even one in which I appeared as a talking head. Such experiences made me aware of three things: how much producers depended on the work of scholars, both on paper and as performers; how because of that dependence they claimed both too much and did too little with their archival video; and that limits institutionally imposed by broadcasters and funding organizations stunted *historical* documentaries' form and therefore content, too often resulting in audiovisual books rather than innovative films producing new histories.

That said, I think *Between Neighborhoods* is very personal, but the personal is more sublimated than narrated, visualized more than described. Davies's archival work presents the visual as illustration of his memory, an older man recalling a younger man's life in Liverpool, as counterpoint to his words. In *Between Neighborhoods* my memories are the original footage I shot, often presented as counterpoint to the archival. *Between Neighborhoods* expresses its poetics in editing, between images and found sounds in dialogic split-screen. And once the artdoc took its dyadic turn, it jettisoned voiceover, opting instead for editing to do its analytic work, which was not explicitly autobiographical (unlike in *Of Time and the City*, the archival materials do not reference personal memories but historical research). Davies's work is self analysis, the voiceover is sonic evidence itself in form and tone as much as content. *Between Neighborhoods* needs space for spectators to work however they want with its image-driven analysis with

neither the direction nor distraction of my spoken words.

But there is an autobiographical backstory to *Between Neighborhoods*, one the film prompts, though, more than it represents. As I've mentioned, my parents took me to the Unisphere when I was very young and I've encountered its key creator, Moses, so many different ways in my life. Growing up in Brooklyn, I was aware of how Moses affected our lives there. Visiting my grandparents in Williamsburg, I wondered why there existed a road right by the back of their building on Hooper Street, cars whizzing by below the kitchen window, as my grandma cooked. It was the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

As a kid, I asked my mom, who grew up in that apartment, "What's going on here?" and she said, "Well, there was this guy called Robert Moses and he built this road while we were living here." She described the dust and the noise of that massive construction blowing into their apartment and forever changing their lives, living with an expressway right there all day and all night all year (really surreal, like Alvie Singer growing up under a rollercoaster in Coney Island, but this was real). His caprice, not to tear their building down, put them in purgatory rather than hell. I understood Moses's pharaonic power, before I read about it, as family history.

It gets even more personal. My father was a historian of landscape architecture, specializing in New York City. He wrote about Frederick Law Olmsted, who is really Moses's predecessor as the city's most comprehensive and enduring planner, one whose work and reputation must have vexed Moses. My father also met Moses, whom he interviewed once, as well as knew Robert Caro, Moses's great biographer, when they both were working at the same time on books in the New York Public Library's Frederick Lewis Allen Room, what we called at home the "typing room," when I was a kid. Decades later (and decades after my father passed), I was a resident writer in the Allen Room, where I undertook much of the research that went into *Between Neighborhoods*, which brought me closer to my father, how he connected urban and personal history in New York City. He lived his entire life in Brooklyn.

Glick: It's a kind of lived or felt understanding of Robert Moses, even before you encountered him through reading and writing about him?

Fein: Yes, but he's not the key to *Between Neighborhoods*' development, even if he is its costar, opposite Unisphere. I came to Queens and saw the borough in dialogue with the scholarship I had done—research, writing, and teaching about the geographies of U.S. empire and transnationalism—and as inspiration for the transhistorical filmwork I aspired to do. So, yes, the personal is important, but in the present more than the past. That is, *Between Neighborhoods* begins with my contemporary life in Queens, expressed in the footage I've shot there. *Those* experiences directed the research I have done about Moses, the NYWF, and Unisphere. Moses as singular, biographical figure does not interest me, but putting Moses in dialogue with Rostow or with Trump or most of all with the people of Queens today does drive me.

What I know most deeply about Moses, comes neither from my childhood in Brooklyn nor my research about him and his works but from my contemporary life in New York, centered in Queens, the borough upon which I believe he left his most profound impact (even more than the Bronx) for the reasons that *Between Neighborhoods* explains. He viewed it at the geodemographic center of his metropolitan empire created by his roads, bridges, and parks, which he celebrated at two World's Fairs in FMCP, where he built Unisphere and where he constructed his Panorama showing all that he built across the city. Riding my bike over and under and through his highways, the concrete rivers he made, makes me think everyday about his legacy. That is where *Between Neighborhoods* begins, I

believe, not with the backstory we now piece together for this interview.

Glick: *Between Neighborhoods* captures two murals that frame a lot of the characteristics of the urban cultural landscape that that film explores. How did you discover these murals? In what ways is *Between Neighborhoods* itself a kind of mural-in-motion?

Fein: I have a long interest in murals. They have been interwoven in my scholarship on the transnational history of Mexican film and my broader writing and teaching about the crossborder history of the Americas. Like so many elements of *Between Neighborhoods*, their use was not planned, though perhaps predestined by my predisposition to work with murals as history texts, as artworks that make history as well as subjects, material evidence, for transhistory, for relating their production and reception across time (which is how the film uses Unisphere). And each of the ones featured in *Between Neighborhoods*, the two indoor ones your question keys on and the equally important outdoor ones the diptych also contemplates, is an important text as well as intertext for my artdoc, which, is a mural itself: a large format, immersive work of socially engaged public art. The murals are then, as you suggest, onscreen interlocutors with *Between Neighborhoods*, comparative representations about the geocultures of Queens, about the visual representation of history and politics, as well as visual evidence for the artdoc.

All of the murals in *Between Neighborhoods* are ones that I encountered in my neighborhood, Jackson Heights. The two indoor ones by named artists are just a few blocks but several decades away from each other as *Between Neighborhoods* explains. Each interprets Queens' place in world history. Inside Jackson Heights' main Post Office on 37th Avenue, around the corner from where I live, is *Development of Jackson Heights* (1937), a bit dirty but still very striking-if-too-unnoticed, high up on a wall at one end of the main service area. Painted by Peppino Mangravite, an Italian-born artist who taught in Columbia University and also in the Art Institute of Chicago, it is a modernization narrative, depicting the linear development of society across space and time led by technology, by the arrival of the elevated subway to Jackson Heights in the previous decade, in the mid-1920s, linking Queens with Manhattan, the so-called outerborough with so-called civilization. It is a West-East story that moves from past to present, left to right, from settlers cultivating the land to middle-class families inhabiting the neighborhood's then-new progressive private housing, modern apartment buildings designed around gardens, like the one I live in today—all catalyzed by the clearing of the land and the construction of elevated subway rails surging out of the painting's central plane. Mangravite's depiction of the 7 train's arrival in Jackson Heights links the New Deal, which produced it and the Cold War, which produced Unisphere, two and-a-half decades later, a couple of miles away in FMCP at Moses's second NYWF. Both public artworks relate liberalism's modernization mythology, technologically derived social progress, respectively by terrestrial and extraterrestrial, subway and outerspace transportation.

The 7 train figures prominently across *Between Neighborhoods* before the murals show up. If Unisphere represents Rostow's Space Age promise to modernize the Third World, the 7 train represents the Third World's actual international immigration as interborough modernization today, Mangravite's West-East past is Queens's South-North future. This is the message of Renzo Ortega's *The Eagle Meets the Condor* (2014), *Between Neighborhoods*' other Jackson Heights indoor mural, which I encountered inside a Peruvian restaurant on Northern Boulevard, and that the artdoc places in split-screen conversation with Mangravite's work. The Peruvian-born Ortega's work is a transhistorical, transnational revision of the Italian-born Mangravite's linear interborough story; it too features the 7 train, transmogrified as Incan-inflected art, not bringing West-East civilization from

Manhattan to Queens but facilitating crosscultural South-North exchange between the Andes and Jackson Heights. *The Eagle Meets the Condor* is the work of a transnational artist; Ortega lives in and paints about two countries at once.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (72:56)

Development of Jackson Heights is the work of an immigrant artist, Mangravite, who came and stayed in the United States, the liberal, frontier, modernization mythopoeia of which his work represents. And as Mangravite's work offers a linear interborough prologue to Unisphere's global story imposed imperially from above, by Moses on Queens and by Rostow on the world, Ortega's mural offers a contemporary epilogue to that earlier epoch's official story. His countermyth repositions imperial ideology about the future in the past. Drawing from the world that surrounds Unisphere today, *The Eagle Meets the Condor* challenges the notion of stages of modernization moving from a premodern southern past to a modern northern future, from Third World to First, from Peru to the United States, with a two-way story of interamerican history where civilizations travel transhistorically and transnationally, shaped by people more than technology.

The other murals that *Between Neighborhoods* considers are outdoor wall paintings by unnamed artists that are also in my neighborhood, in I.S. 145's schoolyard, just a couple of blocks down 80th street from where I live. One, part of a two-work set, on either side of a handball wall, proclaims "Queens is the Future," repositioning the outerborough not as a place awaiting development but a place that has arrived, globally, not determined by technology but by people. But the subway plays a vital role in this Queens-centered visual story, as it does in Mangravite's and Ortega's murals.

The tableau features an aboveground subway car lunging from Manhattan into Queens, and out of the wall into those playing handball (and in my case filming). The position of the mural facing East reinforces the train's direction screaming into the future, into Queens, past a rendering of Lady Liberty. The composition highlights the place of immigration in this story but also diminishing its official iconography before its social reality, depicted by the diverse youth traveling on the train, an African-American kid leans out of the front car his arm aloft echoing, replacing, updating the Statue of Liberty myth. Past him the Empire State Building is left behind as well (in sight of the actual skyscraper visible in the distance through Northern Boulevard, which runs by the schoolyard). Several other murals in the playground celebrate Queens' contemporary cosmopolitanism, its globalization from below, examined in *Between Neighborhoods*. Notably, too, on either side of the handball wall, there are depictions of Spiderman, who hails from Queens (and makes an appearance in *Between Neighborhoods*, in a frame from an early issue in which the mutated Forest Hills high school student lands in sight of Unisphere during the NYWF).



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (76:27).

Yes, as you suggest, the sequence is self-referential; the mural-like diptych places these works into audiovisual conversation with one another as well as with itself.

Glick: Your own neighborhood has recently surfaced on the big screen, with Frederick Wiseman's *In Jackson Heights* (2015). You and he take a very different approach to depicting Queens. What's your view of his project?

Fein: I taught it as the culminating work in my *World Cinema since 1960* course at Feirstein last spring in conjunction with *Between Neighborhoods* and a class visit to Jackson Heights, my neighborhood and Wiseman's subject. Without *In Jackson Heights*, I'm sure *Between Neighborhoods* would not work the way it does; it would be less dedicated to transhistory in form and content.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (76:26).

The two films are intertexts. And Wiseman makes a cameo towards *Between Neighborhoods*'s end, in a photo I shot of him filming *In Jackson Heights*, just around the block from where I live. In the summer of 2014, I had seen him and his DP, John Davey, around my neighborhood over a week or so. There had been no word he was making this film. I took my photo and when he crossed to my side of the street I said hello and we briefly spoke; they asked for advice about where to shoot. Frankly, it was at first unnerving to see Wiseman, one of the greats, greatly admired by me, making a film about Jackson Heights. But once ego receded, it turned out to be a transformative moment in *Between Neighborhoods*' development, because it compelled (and allowed) me, to sharpen my analytic and artistic commitments, which are distinct from his. Though I had not yet transformed the project into a diptych, I knew my film was not simply about Queens today or even about how it became this way. My theme was not only historical, but transhistorical, the dynamic between present and past. Seeing Wiseman work on *In Jackson Heights*, before I saw the actual film more than a year later, at the Museum of the Moving Image, in Astoria—where, about a year after that *Between Neighborhoods* screened at the Queens World Film Festival—I realized that my purpose was different and both more expansive and specific than observing present-day Queens.

As both film scholar and (especially) filmmaker, it was fascinating to observe Wiseman at work in Jackson Heights. One of several instances: When I went to watch a World Cup match in a favorite Uruguayan cafe, I only noted after being

there for a few minutes that Wiseman and his small crew were quietly filming in a corner. They really were flies on the wall and had somehow received permission to do this from the owners if not the actors (i.e., we customers). I watched him indicate to Davey to focus on this or that reaction or individual, he got excited but kept his movements minimal. I could relate to the challenges but also to how it can work. His overall approach, moving in for a short but saturated survey, of only a few weeks, made sense, given his prolific output; it has the benefits and the deficits of a fast look. If he stayed longer, he would have to stay much longer because there would be more questions to ask, I think.

Jackson Heights was not the last time I saw Wiseman at work in a place I work. I ran into him and Davey again over a year ago in the lobby of the New York Public Library, shooting *Ex Libris* (2017). I took out my phone and filmed Wiseman wearing his headphones, monitoring the sound, directing Davey's camerawork from over his DP's shoulder. I observed them without their noticing me as they observed library patrons without warning (I've used this in class). When they stopped shooting, I said hello and we chatted about *In Jackson Heights*.

While Wiseman resists political interpretations of his works (I've seen him speak on several occasions) they are of course political. The last shot of *In Jackson Heights*—of 4th of July Fireworks over Manhattan viewed from the heart of multicultural Queens—sums up the central place of immigration in making the United States. Just as his earlier, undernoted *Canal Zone* (1977) sums up the central place of imperialism in the making of the United States. His works though are not historical, individually. I think *Between Neighborhoods*' place was to show both of these things—immigration and imperialism—at once, transhistorically, orbiting Unisphere.

Glick: I was thinking about *Between Neighborhoods*' connection to Third Cinema, both because there is some shared subject matter as well as the fact that Third Cinema filmmakers saw themselves as theorists of moving images as well as practitioners. How do you see your work resonating with the militant leftist cinemas of Brazil, Argentina, and Cuba?

Fein: This semester I taught Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas's Third Cinema manifesto-in-motion, *La hora de los hornos* (1968). There are lots of thematic and topical connections between it and *Between Neighborhoods*, as their story works between the colonial and neocolonial epochs from the 1960s backwards to the 16th Century and mine works between today's imperial neoliberalism and the imperial liberalism of the era in which they made *La hora*. The links are also in film form; their use of intercuts and overlays of still and moving images shows the dynamic relationship between present and past that *Between Neighborhoods* effects through its split-screen synchronicity. Synergies are also palpable in the formal work undertaken by each video essay, such as the theoretical interventions of original and quoted epigraphs, and the transhistorical objectives in the editing. It's interesting to think how they would have done *La hora* in the digital age, which would serve their doc's objectives so well. With regard to the 1960s, there are a number of resonances between their work and mine: *La hora*'s direct confrontation with Modernization Theory as well as with John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson's social and military interventions in the Americas; the connections between U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam and against the Cuban Revolution; the tracing of the continuities between European and U.S. imperialism. Like *La hora*, *Between Neighborhoods* appears at a critical moment in interamerican and global relations with the once-called Third World, now provoked by Trump's immigration policies.

Glick: *Between Neighborhoods* itself is a work of culture, but it also seeks to represent cultural practices directly through its stitching together of World's Fair

footage. One of the most striking contrasts in the film is the sequence of national pavilions where attendees can “consume” a country’s food, music, folk customs, or architecture juxtaposed with contemporary observational footage that depicts street life around the Unisphere and ethnic enclaves of Queens. What is the difference between these two forms of culture?

Fein: The Fair’s international exhibits were forms of vicarious tourism for spectators as well as international boosterism for those countries that sent exhibits to Moses’s 1964-1965 NYWF (which was not officially sanctioned as a “World’s Fair” and led many governments to skip Flushing Meadows). My archival research offered opportunities to juxtapose footage about those international exhibits, news programs as well as NYWF film and TV propaganda, with my footage of transnational communities from those same areas of the world that thrive in Queens today, because of immigration since the 1960s. The crossediting contemplates the difference between a moment when official culture assumed strict boundaries between the United States and the then-called Third World, expressed by imperial display in proto-Epcot pavilions for consumption by visitors to the Fair, and one in which daily life today, in the same place, FMCP and nearby Queens neighborhoods, show the transnationalization of New York City by immigrants from across the world.

In one sequence, *Between Neighborhoods* essays religion in Queens, internationally at the NYWF—circumscribed by Western Christianity and transnationally in Queens today, beyond Christianity. It culminates in one of Moses’s most notable attractions, the Vatican’s exhibit, featuring Michelangelo’s *Pieta*; and an intraborough sequence featuring Our Lady of Sorrows, a Corona congregation (comprised overwhelmingly of first and second-generation Latino parishioners, notably, but not only, immigrants from Ecuador and Mexico) very near Unisphere, and St. Sebastian, a couple of miles away, beneath the 7 train, in Woodside, a parish forged by Irish immigrants and now notably home to Filipino-American worshippers



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (45:10). [Click for clip.](#)

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Glick: Towards the end of the documentary, you "foreground" the connection between Robert Moses and Donald Trump, suggesting similarities in terms of points of NY origin, their personas, and their attempts to reshape infrastructure. How did you come to make this connection?

Fein: It was staring me in the face. Trump's rise politically took place as I worked on *Between Neighborhoods*. His rhetorical war on both Muslim and Latin American immigration provoked my thinking about this Queens-born developer's connections to his boyhood borough today and to New York's other notorious developer. Moses held similarly ethnocentric, racist views that guided his also similarly antidemocratic vision of building and politics that reinforced social divisions, created alternately by walls today and highways then. But there were more parallels and connections not just between the two figures but the ideological and political forces surrounding them, surrounding the development of NYC across the last half century, between liberal and neoliberal political economies and ideologies. In this regard, *Between Neighborhoods*' connection between Trump and Moses exemplifies both how the project evolved and also how working audiovisually generates transhistorical insights as well as documentary art. Historical research offered material to make art that says more about history than either a straight scholarly article or a straight American-experience-type documentary that in different idioms, monographic academic writing or public-television-style biography, reduce and distend more than distill and disrupt.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (66:22)

Let me offer a couple of examples of how *Between Neighborhoods* attempts to do this between Trump and Moses. It brings them together through their works: a split-screen tone poem joins Moses's Unisphere in FMCP and the miniature version Trump copied at Columbus Circle, which he erected in front of his eponymous International Hotel and Tower, the former Paramount Building. When Trump bought it in the early 1990s, Moses's grotesque New York Coliseum still stood 90 degrees to the west; now it's the site of the Time-Warner Center. The commercial mall is a fitting neoliberal successor to Moses's earlier "publicly" built exhibition space and an analogue to the neoliberal suburbanization of Manhattan by the likes of Trump. I do not narrate that, no expository titles even; I simply let the two Unispheres talk to each other at this latter point in the film by when many key ideas have already been expressed. It's a culmination and an introduction before *Between Neighborhoods* crosscuts between Trump's presidential declarations about building new infrastructure including his borderwall and Moses's declarations about the NYWF's potential to transform the world. María, an Ecuadorean immigrant in Corona, offers a measured condemnation of the then-presidential candidate's cynical character, which *Between Neighborhoods*

makes Trump hear.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (70:01). [Click for clip.](#)

It's logical that Trump admires Moses as his minisphere indicates. Both disdained democracy and fixated on public promotion through mass media as a source of personal power. As *Between Neighbors* shows in archival footage of a TV interview Moses gave at the end of the Fair's first season, the Power Broker affirmed his admiration for both "dictators and businessmen" because in his view "they could get things done." I could hear Trump's own autocratic, egocentric rhetoric as well as imagine this son of Queens as Moses's successor, the unintended offspring of the planner's final act, his New York World's Fair in Queens.

However, the links between Trump and Moses were not interesting to me as biography but as personae that could effect, through their audiovisual juxtaposition, the transhistoricity between the two regimes *Between Neighborhoods* works between. It was that second World's Fair that captured the transition between liberalism and neoliberalism in which Trump rose to prominence in the TV Age that Unisphere, massive monument to global communications, commemorated. Constructed as a public work in a public park but with corporate funds by U.S. Steel in return for naming rights: the plaques that remain in place as contractually dictated by Moses's NYWF Corp. In the coming Seventies, when both New York City and U.S. empire declined in economic power, each turned to deregulation, the use of state power in the name of private enterprise, to do what government could not do in global or urban planning.

Donald Trump rose as neoliberalism dominated U.S. political economy. His brand relied on patronage by the state, tax breaks and deregulation. Long before he ran for president he had competed with politicians in the public imagination in New York City as the personification of development and culture. He had replaced Moses, whom liberalism had empowered, as the city's leading developer. Moreover, as *Between Neighborhoods*' explores, Trump's work as a developer, despite its Manhattan location was as antiurban as Moses's suburbanizing public works, exemplified by his vertical subdivisions' disregard for the life of the streets they occupied, for the people who walked by his buildings, which were social, inward-focused enclaves for occupants not civic structures.

This led to the second site *Between Neighborhoods* visits to evoke its Trump-Moses connection. I went out to the so-called "public" golf course, Trump Links, that Trump claims to have built but that actually he only operates under a contract that the neoliberal Bloomberg administration granted him. An enclave of bourgeois privilege, enclosing irreplaceable shoreline on the East River, at Ferry Point, the Bronx, amidst one of NYC's poorest, park-deprived neighborhoods is a perfect example of neoliberal development, privatization marketed falsely as public works. Its location—just beneath Moses's Bronx-Whitestone Bridge to Queens, completed for the Power Broker's first World's Fair in Flushing Meadows and alongside the Whitestone Expressway, widened with federal funds secured for his second World's Fair there—captured the present and past between Trump's

neoliberal and Moses's liberal empires. I use the documentary mise-en-scène to transhistoricize Trump and Moses, between today and the 1960s. Trump Links is the descendant of Moses's World's Fair, an analogue for the U.S. Open's privatization of so much of FMCP into a gated community that, in the false name of globalization, fences the park off from Queens's global residents for a two-week fair built on the foundations of the 1964-1965 NYWF's Singer Bowl stadium. The U.S. Open is Moses's corporately sponsored legacy that has been a platform for the celebrity of Trump who, *Between Neighborhoods* shows, made cameos in the stands to stoke his prepresidential brand on TV. The artdoc used the large "Trump Links" sign, which I filmed from a public bus crossing the Whitestone Bridge as well as on the golf course's grounds (until I was gently asked to leave by security guards last Winter). The branding serves as visual link between its namesake and Moses, between today and yesterday, between neoliberalism and liberalism in the sequence's series of parallels between the two regimes. It helped me tie *Between Neighborhoods* together transhistorically as it concluded.



Between Neighborhoods, Seth Fein (69:28)

Glick: You were an early adopter of new technologies in the classroom. You frequently incorporated sounds, clips, graphics, photographs, and texts into your lectures in the early days of PowerPoint. But *Between Neighborhoods* doesn't seem like its necessarily in the tradition of the illustrated lecture. Would you say it connects with a tradition of social documentary? Or the essay film? Or perhaps an alternative form of historiographic installation art?

Fein: Let me take the last part first. To choose among the terms you offer, it's an essay film and an experimental documentary. Those are not discrete things, just different established boxes that can be checked. What I call it is an *artdoc*, period. In any case, it doesn't matter what I call it; it's whatever you, the viewer, the critic, says it is for them. I don't own its interpretation, just as Moses does not own that of Unisphere. That is a grandiose comparison but it's a relevant one given what we're talking about, I'm in control of Unisphere in *Between Neighborhoods*, which I think of as an artdoc.

I do agree that my filmmaking emerged out of my multimedia teaching. I taught across the digital turn at Yale, where there were resources to help me create a database that crossed my audiovisual assets with my paper documents. Teaching allowed me the freedom to express transhistorical ideas and to present research in ways that I would have loved to do in my scholarship but, as we have discussed, neither the professional boundaries of academic history nor the expressive limits of writing encouraged or even allowed. Teaching became where I could begin to perform my public humanities, analytically and expressively as audiovisual art made from research. When I wanted to apply for a fellowship that would have allowed postdoctoral training in filmmaking, I was blocked by a well-meaning department chair who insisted that I prioritize publishing even though I believed my original research about interamerican film and TV could best be expressed in video, and that doing that would be a considerable scholarly contribution to history.

Like others, I'm sure, I used PowerPoint in ways that it wasn't designed to be

used. I ignored its aestheticizing features while straining its capacity as a delivery device by projecting several videos at once, which could cause it to crash. I would never use PowerPoint to establish the “five points of my lecture”; I used it to show five different films at once, and then rapidly shift to another slide and display three of the same clips and then something new, and so on. In class I was working in realtime with my planned presentation, continuing the analysis that had produced and generated the “lecture,” which was generating ideas for documentary art and scholarship. I found the limits of PowerPoint generative by compelling me to figure out how to analyze nonlinearly within its sequential structure. Maybe I wouldn’t have eventually made films if not for PowerPoint’s linearity, because even if I was looking to move around times and places experimentally, within slides and between them, I did have an idea about the overall sequence of the presentation. I wanted spectators to interact with that path, across my multimedia presentations as I still want them to do across my documentaries.

My own interest in filmmaking as scholarly practice advanced further in my *Film and History* research seminar at Yale, where I required a compilation documentary as well as a paper for final undergraduate projects. All students, whether they had a background in production or not, did this (well). It was incredible to see how filmmaking transformed their analysis of film, evident in their papers’ form and content as well as in their digital documentaries. Students understood the films they studied more deeply after having taken them apart and then edited their own films about them. Correspondingly, their writing became more evocative and their editing of video evidently affected the composition of their prose, which invoked juxtaposition more than exposition, compared to earlier iterations of this course that I taught before adding the filmmaking component.

Glick: Has *Between Neighborhoods* been changing the way you teach your classes at Brooklyn College’s Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema?

Fein: Not at all and in every way. In my grad seminar on Latin American cinema this semester, one of the key questions we considered was whether “Latin America” or regional geopolitical designations generally are useful categories for the study of film. I found myself frequently referring to *Between Neighborhoods* for examples of how film culture has been transnational since its inception but how that transnationality has changed across time around us, across the last century between imperialism and immigration. After repeatedly, reflexively referring to the project, sometimes showing clips of things in it, I finally screened it all in this class, primarily comprised of Screen Studies students, to see what film scholars think of it not only for what it says about some of the theoretical and historical issues we have covered, but also as an example of documentary as scholarship. I had done this as well last Spring in my *World Cinema since 1960* grad course, primarily comprised of filmmakers (MFAs), who were very, very frank and insightful in their assessment of it as a documentary.

Between Neighborhoods combines so much of what I had been striving to do in scholarship as well as in instruction it has proven to be the best statement, better than anything I could say or write, about what I think about audiovisual history. I guess it’s like teaching one’s own writing (which I have qualms about). But given that I am teaching as a film historian, not a filmmaker, it’s also saying, both to my film-scholar and filmmaker grad students that filmmaking is (or can be) scholarship; that audiovisual art is a high form of analysis and expression in the humanities, not just a subject of scholarship and that I attempt it, not just advocate for it. Accordingly, following what I began at Yale, I allow, in fact, encourage my film-scholar as well as filmmaker students to make audiovisual essays, about film history, as an alternative to writing papers. This has produced

stunning work from the filmmakers, who are the ones who have so far taken me up on this offer.

Glick: What's next for *Between Neighborhoods*? What can you say about your upcoming projects and how they draw on, but separate from, *Between Neighborhoods*?

Fein: *Between Neighborhoods* continues to change in dialogue with new ideas, politics in the world and in Queens, as well as my new shooting and new research. Notably, and happily, I recently gained permission to use previously unused archival audio of NYWF Corp. events and an extraordinarily candid TV interview with Moses I had discovered in my investigations but had only transcribed on screen. In addition to providing unique evidence the audio especially presents new opportunities and obligations for editing this new sound with new moving images, as in the ["crossroads" clip](#) (above).

Between Neighborhoods' staggered screenings have also provided opportunities that I cannot resist to work on it. Discussing *Between Neighborhoods* with new viewers generate new ambitions. This Fall, within one week I had two screenings that were each homecomings before specially informed (and intimidating) audiences that spanned the artdoc's commitments. First, I returned to my boyhood borough, Brooklyn, to screen *Between Neighborhoods* at Make the Road New York, the Latino immigrant-rights organization's Bushwick branch. The audience was overwhelmingly working-class immigrants from Ecuador, a community that appears prominently in *Between Neighborhoods*. I was more nervous at this event than at any other screening. It was very gratifying and surprising to experience the reception of the film, which prompted a spontaneous chant of "bajo con capitalismo," and to engage in the postscreening conversation with these citizen-activists who organize against restrictions to immigration and also the privatization of public space. Their campaigns have included the successful effort to stop construction of a professional soccer stadium in FMCP that would have further enclosed parkland vital to immigrant New Yorkers. There was, in fact, a big poster of Make the Road members in front of Unisphere, to my surprised delight, up in the room where we screened.

I learned a lot about my film here as I did from a different direction, the following week, when I screened it at Harvard, where I had been a fellow in multimedia history in the Charles Warren Center a couple of years before. It was a tremendous experience to share and discuss *Between Neighborhoods* with scholars dedicated to interdisciplinary history, including the pioneering multimedia historian, [Vincent Brown](#), himself a documentarian, who moderated the session. Both events stimulated new ideas. And I will continue to exhibit and talk about *Between Neighborhoods* as it evolves. I am also considering streaming it for individual and institutional use. Ideally, because the project is immersive and split-screen, it should be viewed large, so I have some concerns about this, but I want to share it more widely; people who have seen it have asked me about access to show to others, especially students. In any case, I'm ready to let it go, even as I continue to change it, because it might always change, and I am at work now on two new projects, a documentary and a collection of essays, which also makes it less likely to change much.

The new documentary is [Our Neighborhood](#), which examines Washington's small-screen cold war against the Cuban Revolution across Latin America across the 1960s. It developed out of my long-term research and writing on the subject, which I developed into a documentary during my year at Harvard's Warren Center. Some of its archival footage makes a cameo in *Between Neighborhoods* with which it shares some themes about the history of modernization and communication. A friend once noted that many of my published essays had

similar titles, despite being about discrete things. The same seems to be true of my films.

Maybe that is because they do inevitably affect each other's development or perhaps it is my conceit to enjoy the significant contrasts between works that have similar titles. Or, maybe I have a thing for the word "neighborhood"? Who knows? In this case, the film's title is the translation of one of the programs, the telenovela *Nuestro Barrio*, it examines, which inadvertently enunciates a key trope of Washington's interamerican imperialism, its so-called Good Neighborhood. One thing both projects share is engagement with today. (I wrote an [op-ed](#) about the connections between Washington's TV initiatives in Latin America in the 1960s and in the Middle East after Bush II invaded Iraq). At *Our Neighborhood's* heart is my archival video research about the programs themselves as well as paper documents that I obtained through my successful Freedom of Information Act case about the propaganda's production, distribution, and reception (about which I have written). More recently, working with my collaborators Dewey Thompson and Christopher Torella of Pickerel Pie Entertainment, here in Long Island City, Queens, we have shot interviews with key behind-the-camera producers and on-camera performers involved in this work.

My other present project is *Writing for Unisphere*, a collection of essays that is an unanticipated and organic byproduct of *Between Neighborhoods*. Just as audiovisual art provided me a way to transcend writing to do history, making the diptych triggered writing that in content and form, analysis and presentation, would not exist without having done the film. These essays revolve around Unisphere. They think about public space in New York City to develop themes raised by Unisphere. These essays are not the artdoc's scholarly supplement. They are its creative-writing offspring, experimental historical writing inspired by experimental artdoc video (a connection they explore) as they also develop original research that informed *Between Neighborhoods* but that did not fit the film's form. These essays have spilled out of me, I could never have conceived them without having made my film the way I have, here in Queens. Information about all of this can be found at sevenlocalfilm.com.

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Notes

Introduction notes

1. For overviews of the World's Fair, see Lawrence R. Samuel, *The End of the Innocence: The 1964–1965 New York World's Fair* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Joseph Tirella, *Tomorrow-Land: The 1964–65 World's Fair and the Transformation of America* (Guilford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Laura Hollengreen et. al., eds., *Meet Me at the Fair: A World's Fair Reader* (ETC Press, 2014). [[return to p. 1](#)]
2. While Moses's "urban renewal" projects involved the expansion of parks, pools, and cultural institutions, they also led to sweeping displacement of long-rooted communities, the inequitable building of public facilities, and the segregation of low-income minorities in poorly managed housing blocks. For more about Robert Moses and the politics of displacement, strategic neglect, and autocratic design, see Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974) as well as Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 287–348. For an account of urban renewal in New York City and its relationship to Cold War era city planning, see Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The recent exhibition and book catalog, *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, casts Moses in a more sympathetic light, looking at his public works projects in relation to post-WWII trends in urbanism. Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).
3. Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
4. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1995), 1–13.
5. For more on the history of post-WWII Queens, see, for example, Robert A.M. Stern et. al., *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995), 986–1025; Claudia Gryvatz Copquin, *Neighborhoods of Queens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan, *Crossing the Boulevard: Strangers, Neighbors, Aliens in a New America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).
6. Seth Fein, "Culture across Borders in the Americas," *History Compass* 1:1 (2003). For more articles by Fein, see Seth Fein, "Myths of Cultural Imperialism and Nationalism in Golden Age Mexican Cinema," in *Fragments of a Golden Age*:

The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940, eds. Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 159–98; Seth Fein, “Everyday Forms of Transnational Collaboration: U.S. Film Propaganda in Cold War Mexico,” in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, eds. Gilbert Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, Ricardo Salvatore (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 400–50; Seth Fein, “Producing the Cold War in Mexico: The Public Limits of Covert Communications,” in *In From the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 171–213; Seth Fein, “From Collaboration to Containment: Hollywood and the International Political Economy of Mexican Cinema after the Second World War,” in *Mexico’s Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*, eds. Joanne Herschfield and David Maciel (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 123–64; Seth Fein, “Transculturated Anticommunism: Cold War Hollywood in Postwar Mexico,” in *Visible Nations: Latin American Cinema and Video*, ed. Chon A. Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 82–111; Seth Fein, Review of *The Fog of War* (Errol Morris, dir., Sony Pictures Classics, 2003), *American Historical Review* 109.5 (October 2004): 1260–61; Seth Fein, Review of *Frida* (Julie Taymor, dir., Miramax, 2002) and *Frida: Naturaleza Viva* (Paul Leduc, dir., Clasa, 1984), *American Historical Review* 108.5 (October 2003): 1261–63.

7. See, for example, [the program for Social Documentation](#) at UC Santa Cruz; the [Center for Documentary Studies](#) at Duke; [The Documentary Center at George Washington University](#); the Open [Documentary](#) Lab at MIT; the [Jonathan B. Murray Center for Documentary Journalism](#) at the University of Missouri; the [Documentary/Public Humanities program](#) at Yale. Also, the [Media Arts + Practice Division](#) at USC and the [Sensory Ethnography Lab](#) at Harvard embrace new forms of socially engaged nonfiction.

Conversation notes

1. The generous intellectual and institutional interventions of Matt Jacobson and other scholar/artists have contributed invaluable to *Between Neighborhoods*’ development. Matt brought his own expertise about U.S. imperialism and immigration as well as the practice of documentary art to a Queens College symposium about *Between Neighborhoods* that opened its gallery installation there sponsored by the Kupferberg Center for the Arts and moderated by Julia del Palacio, a historian of Mexico who is also a performing NYC artist, leader of [Radio Jarocho](#), which has supported my work with its own. Matt also brought me and *Between Neighborhoods* to Yale, for its exhibition in [Public Humanities](#) there.

My former Yale colleague Gil Joseph arranged for *Between Neighborhoods*’ early installation and exhibition in conjunction with the semicentennial meeting Latin American Studies Association (LASA), over which Gil presided, in NYC in May 2016. That collaboration directly emerged from our long-term association in making the transnational and cultural turns in interamerican history, expressed in print. LASA’s [symposium at CUNY’s Graduate Center](#)—moderated by the event’s co-organizer, historian Amy Chazkel (CUNY)—proved vitally encouraging for the project’s ongoing evolution. The panel included: Laura Wexler (Yale) whose comments historicized *Between Neighborhoods*’ visual poetics in ways vitally encouraging and that I would not have otherwise seen; Peter L’Official (Bard), theorized *Between Neighborhoods*’ connections to NYC literature and politics; Mary Louise Pratt, whose scholarship about empire has long influenced my own, positioned Unisphere in the global history of imperial iconography; and

Freddy Castiblanco ([Roosevelt Avenue Community Alliance](#)), a Colombian-US transnational immigrant-rights-and-neighborhood-sovereignty activist as well as Queens cultural entrepreneur, commented on *Between Neighborhoods'* links to immigrant rights in NYC at both its Queens College and CUNY Grad Center symposia; he also hosted my artdoc's earliest iteration, *Outerspace Innerborough*, at [Terraza 7](#), the incomparable transamerican music venue he owns and operates on the Jackson Heights-Elmhurst border marked by the Seven train in the heart of global Queens.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Mungiu constructs a very personal story within an infrastructural assemblage of illegal plans and illegal desires to escape an unwanted pregnancy. Due to their scarcity, industrial objects constantly share hands as a medium of enforced group solidarity.



"Infrastructural fraternity"—money and aquarium with two fishes in Gabita's and Otilia's dorm room. Mungiu uses money as a capturing device and the aquarium as a metaphor of captivity.



Gabita's and Otilia's dorm room is a space of feminine solidarity where things and secrets are collectively owned.

4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days at the moment of neoliberal catastrophe

by [Dušan Bjelić](#)

“... the guilty should pay” — Gabita

Endless neocolonial wars, genocides, immigration crises, sovereign debt, global warming and racism at the state level are signs in the present global crisis of what Walter Benjamin would have called “catastrophe” and what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism.” A critical response to this crisis calls for a transnational perspective—one that engages the global crisis at a national context and treats national themes and crises as variations of the global crisis. As a medium of global communication, cinema operates simultaneously on global and local national levels, and as such, cinema is the perfect transnational locus for critical intervention. By entering the global market with a universally appreciated thematic as its “cultural commodity,” small national film productions, like those from Romania, invite a global critical response, which in turn, by interpreting the creative ambiguities of the film’s images in different cultural contexts, may clash with, or rupture, the local national interpretative frames of the film’s analysis. Such clashes of interpretation may open up the national cinema to a transnational critical perspective.

As a case study of a critical site of the transnational clash of global versus national interpretative frameworks, I will offer an analysis of the 2007 Romanian *Palme d’Or* winner by Cristian Mungiu, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, not as it is more commonly interpreted as a commentary on the Romanian Communist past, but rather as a critical allegory of the Romanian neoliberal future.

The film tells a fictionalized version of a true story dealing with an illegal abortion during the Communist prohibition on abortion. It traces that experience as undergone by a young Romanian student Gabita (Laura Vasiliu) and shows the rape that she and her friend Otilia (Anamaria Marinca) experience by the abortionist Mr. Bebe (Vlad Ivanov) in exchange for his service. The ghost of Communism underpins previous interpretations of Mungiu’s film. In this case, interpretations converge around the claim that the film is about the two women’s experience of the regime’s structural misogyny. That seems to be the critics’ sole entry into the Communist past.[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) As Constantin Parvulescu in his 2009 *Jump Cut* article puts it, the film “... is ultimately the story of two friends and a friendship”[2]; for Doru Pop, Mungiu’s film “is a moral questioning of how people can make bad decisions and act maliciously against their fellow human beings”[3]; Dominique Nasta situates this “moral questioning” within “the ‘war between women and Ceausescu,’” adding that the film can be seen “as a kind of slice of life, a critical fragment of the existence of these two girls under Communism, showing how true friendship and solidarity were at work.”[4]



Abortions, hairdryers, and friends--three things that define Romanian female students under Communism.



Otilia meets Mr. Bebe in his car. In the background people are standing in line for food, a common sight during Ceausescu's radical austerity measures.



Otilia at Adi's family dinner party 'taking a shot' for her passive boyfriend. She left Gabita in the hotel room alone because she 'owed him' this visit. Otilia is here in *debt* to Adi's mother because she made a special dish for her. Creditor-debtor relations also define intimate relations as punitive relations.

Notwithstanding the obvious relevance of such analysis, in my view, these analyses leave out an important untapped pool of signification in the film. In short, Mungiu has cooked for us more than the critics have served.

Instead of purchasing a critical entry into the Communist past from the standpoint of "oppressed subjects," I will offer an analysis of the villain. By deploying the strategy of dialectical reversal, I will view the abortionist from the Communist past as an allegorical inscription of the Romanian neoliberal future. As a cultural criminologist, I surely appreciate the dialectical reversal of U.S. villains into social critics. Such is the mafia mob Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), the main character of the HBO TV series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), who, as an allegory of the social critic, puts a criminal face on U.S. global power.

In fact, Tony Soprano's crimes of racketeering pale in comparison to the white-collar crimes by his Wall Street golf-club members who were plotting the financial catastrophe of 2008. Here one can recall Bertold Brecht's line from *The Threepenny Opera* (1928): "What is robbing a bank compared to founding a bank?" Furthermore, Soprano's homicides and torture pale in comparison to the crimes against humanity and torture committed by George Bush's government while the show was aired. The fact that mafia mobs all eventually face justice while politicians and bankers do not reveals that criminals remain within the boundaries of legal justice as most of us do, while politicians and bankers are above it. This unjust discrepancy gives the villains the status of critics of the system.

To some extent, the villain in Mungiu's film, Mr. Bebe, is at once a victimizer in the Romanian past and a critic of the Romanian neoliberal future.

At first glance, the story about abortion and rape in Communist Romania has no tangible link to present-day global capitalism, but abortion and rape do speak to a global audience. Analyzing the previous film interpretations of rape and abortion as metaphors of Communist oppression from an U.S. neoliberal context allows for a transnational co-extension of this metaphoric meaning to U.S. "disaster capitalism," with let's say, rape as its metaphor, or, in other words, it allows us to read the Romanian past as a neoliberal present. To this end, I argue that Mungiu's film in the character of Bebe, perhaps unconsciously, stumbles upon the Romanian neoliberal future in this film about illegal abortion from the Romanian Communist past.

To be fair, Mungiu himself in one of his interviews stated that his "dark and sober film" "inspects the side effects of Communism ... from a very human perspective." [5] But in another of his interviews, he frames the Romanian economy as the film's preamble about illegal abortion:

"It was a way of saying that we have to boost the economy: to complete our plans in economics and agriculture we therefore have to increase the population. ... Because of this reasoning, abortion was forbidden for much of the population." [6]

Mungiu's ambiguous intention allows multiple and unexpected interpretations. Surely, one can interpret Gabita's and Otilia's rapes as a manifestation of their "tacit resistance" [7] to the masculine cruelty of the regime and see Otilia as the Romanian version of Sonya Mermeladova from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, who prostitutes to feed her family. But if we step outside the implicit humanism of the victim, we are left with the reality of the disciplinary and dehumanizing power of global capitalism. Considering the historic fact that neoliberal capitalism invented the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the

Cold War precisely for the purpose of economically destabilizing countries like Romania to use national debt to intensify internal tensions and lead to social rapture, then “the side effects of Communism” extend to neoliberalism as well.

Surely, Gabita and Otilia were dehumanized by abortion and rape. However, as the film shows, they made a *choice* to these ends so that their dehumanization belongs not to choice-less Communist power but rather, as we will see, to a liberal power. And that power deploys choice and contract to transform Gabita’s and Otilia’s subjectivity to submission. More likely, as I will address further, Gabita’s and Otilia’s dehumanization resembles that of Maria (Luminata Gheorghiu) a Romanian woman from Michael Haneke’s film *Code Unknown* (2000), who endures dehumanization on a Paris street corner as a beggar.

Mungiu’s film *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, is part of his series of films about life under Communism called *Tales From the Golden Age*. The film is the most recognized and awarded film in the basket of the Romanian New Wave cinema, which emerged on the global scene at the beginning of this century. Films such as *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005), *The Paper Will Be Blue* (2006) *Aurora* (2010) *Beyond the Hills* (2012) harvested numerous awards at prominent film festivals in Cannes, Berlin, Chicago and Locarno and earned the praise of film critics around the world.

As a whole, these films make up perhaps one of the most significant small national cinemas with the creative power of small and cooperative productions challenging Hollywood’s expensive and studio production industry. These are low budget films, with a common minimalistic aesthetic of social realism, all telling dark stories, shot with a fixed camera in real time and filled with rigorous dialogue. The directors, cinematographers, and script writers also like to call themselves the “generation of the decree,” referring to the Government’s antiabortion decree 770/66 introduced in 1966—more about this later. Born in 1968, Mungiu regards his film as an autobiographical return to the time when the government had forced his entire generation of future filmmakers into life. Naturally then, dialogue with the ghosts of the Communist past directly or indirectly dominates in all these films.

The plot

Mungiu’s film *4 Months...* tells a story based on a real event about an illicit abortion paid in the form of a “voluntary” rape at the time of Ceausescu’s antiabortion regime. The central character in the film is Otilia, a young woman who takes on the burden of helping her college roommate Gabita get an illegal abortion. The story begins with two female students in their dorm room getting ready to meet an abortionist recommended by a friend. Gabita is the pregnant one and is somewhat disorganized in contrast to Otilia, who has taken it upon herself to organize the entire illegal operation. They go over the list of things needing to be done: Otilia is to meet her boyfriend to borrow additional money for the abortion and to check in at the hotel recommended by the abortionist. And while Gabita waits in the hotel room, Otilia is to meet the abortionist at the agreed time and place. In addition, we learn at her meeting with her boyfriend that Otilia is expected the same afternoon to attend her boyfriend’s mother’s birthday party.

For the time being, Gabita disappears from the story and the camera follows Otilia running around to collect money from her boyfriend, pay for the hotel room and meet the abortionist. Unexpected glitches follow her in the process. First, the hotel reservations made by Gabita earlier over the phone turn out to have not been confirmed, and additional free rooms are not available due to a convention in the city. She thus goes to another hotel and checks in. But because a single room is not available, she has to check into two rooms, which cost more than

planned. She then meets the abortionist, who arrives by car at the designated place just as Otilia arrives. They meet, and another glitch emerges: to his surprise, the one who needs the abortion does not show up as agreed. His dissatisfaction and suspicion grow after he learns that they did not secure a room in one of the two hotels he had asked for. After getting assurances from Otilia that he can trust them, they head to the hotel where he meets Gabita.



Solitude in action. Otilia leaves the dorm on the way to the hotel where Gabita will have an abortion. Her mundane appearance conceals her illegal project.



Double bedroom, an ominous sign of a double rape.

He immediately expresses his dissatisfaction about Gabita's failure to follow their agreement and sets up a commanding tone in order to prevent any further glitches. With a stern voice, he outlines the criminal and medical consequences if things don't go his way. He explains the procedures: "After I put the probe in, you'll bleed and the fetus will come out." Gabita must remain still until the fetus comes out, which can last two hours or "three-four days." He further instructs her not to let anybody into the room, and in the case of serious complications she should call medical emergency and hope for the best. All in all, after the procedure is done, she is on her own. During the course of his examination of Gabita it turns out that she is further along in her pregnancy than she had told him and Otilia, which only further complicates her abortion and adds to Bebe's suspicions about her. He nonetheless agrees to proceed with the abortion under the condition that he is not paid in money. This puzzles the women and during the course of heated exchanges, it becomes evident that in return for his service he expects to have sex with both of them.



Bebe's strategic guilt-inducing opening is aimed at disciplining sloppy Gabita.





We learn that Gabita had agreed during her phone conversation with Bebe that instead of monetary payment they would "work something out." He insists that their agreement should be honored. They protest, he threatens to leave, and Gabita and Otilia accept his demand. The rape scenes are left out. Gabita waits for her turn outside, smoking in angst; then Otilia waits for Gabita in the bathroom. This takes place in the room where the procedure is performed, and then instructions are given to Otilia to throw the wrapped fetus "down the rubbish chute." After Bebe leaves, the two women sit in silence. After a short reflection about the event, Otilia heads to the birthday party while Gabita remains alone in the room.



Gabita is having second thoughts; the reality of the abortion is sinking in.

At the party, Otilia maintains her composure, torn between her rape experience and insults by the guests, middleclass academics, about her modest social upbringing—she is the daughter of a soldier—while her boyfriend remains a silent bystander. Otilia leaves the party unhappy about his passive attitude and heads to hotel room. There she encounters a somewhat confused Gabita in the bed and the fetus on the bathroom floor. As instructed, she takes the fetus wrapped up in towel. She heads out into the night with the promise to Gabita that she will bury the fetus; in the course of finding the place she ends up throwing the fetus into a trash container. Upon her return to the hotel, she encounters an empty hotel room, only to find Gabita at the dinner table in the hotel's restaurant waiting hungry for her meal. To her question "Did you bury it?" Otilia reminds her of their

agreement and asks her never to talk about it again.

| | |
|---|---|
|  |  |
| Otilia finds Gabita in the bed motionless; she wakes up confused as if waking up from a nightmare. | The fetus wrapped in a white cloth laying on the cold marble floor teases out the Biblical image of baby Jesus as if he were massacred by the hostile world. The shot of the fetus conveys powerful anti-abortion sentiments. |
|  |  |
| Otilia throws up after disposing the fetus in a trash container as if her body were rejecting her new subjectivity. | Gabita worries for a proper burial of the fetus. In the background is the wedding party's music that amplifies her moral ambiguity, which was so harshly disciplined by Bebe. |

Bebe's disciplinary power

As Foucault pointed out, power is the relation of forces, of one action against another, creating a relation of domination and submission. As Kristin M. Jones correctly observed, “Bebe is a law outside the law,”[8] meaning that his power comes not from Ceausescu’s law as the law of the country but from some other register of power—it comes from his language. As we will see from the conversation in the hotel room, Bebe’s language primarily functions not as an instrument of communication, but rather as a disciplinary instrument of submission. Bebe’s illocutionary power arises from his perverse use of a “speech act,” of Gabita’s agreement with him “to work something out,” as an institution of contractual obligation.

There are two structural preconditions at work in Bebe’s rape narrative. The first is his understanding of woman as the agency of distrust, and the second is his masculine language of terror. Both preconditions appropriate a power grid based on creditor-debtor relations. Bebe’s rape narrative can be broken down into three strategic segments: contract, debt, and payment.

Contract:

If Gabita and Otilia’s submission to rape marked the total capture of feminine chaos, the sloppy preparations for Gabita’s abortion mark the beginning of it. As



As the signifier for a society of risk, Bebe’s message is that abortion as private property is owned at private risk.



Examination is a precursor to rape. The shot displays the sharp gendered asymmetry of power, an active masculine knowledge about woman's anatomy vis-à-vis Gabita's passive female body.



Bebe's strategic rage tactically constructs himself as a victim vis-à-vis two 'foxes' trying to take advantage of his 'good will'.

agreed, Bebe arrives on time by car to pick up Gabita, but Otilia shows up instead. Gabita, he learns, is waiting not at the hotel as he had demanded. Sensing potential danger in this disorderly beginning, Bebe stops the car. "Trust is vital." Otilia offers an assurance, "You can trust us completely." Bebe takes her answer as confirmation of what in his mind is an oral "contract" between Gabita and himself.

Debt:

As a creditor, Bebe understands that the economy of debt is predicated on guilt. As soon as he meets Gabita, he capitalizes on her sloppiness and instantly establishes a strategic dominance to increase the volume of Gabita's guilt. "We've got off to a bad start, young lady." His long silence gives gravitas to his words and forces Gabita to own the guilt. He has no time for small talk. Instead, he handles the conversation as a war of positions. His stern, patronizing voice broken by significant silences draws a line in the sand from where he gives orders to establish control over what he has perceived to be a dangerous feminine chaos. As if speaking to a child, he repeats his instructions. "I told you two things on the phone. One, get a room at the Unirea or the Moldova. Two, meet me in person. You think I asked for the sake of it?" By not following his instructions, Gabita has created a dangerous situation, which opens an abyss of guilt from which she and Otilia will crawl out raped.

From the start, Bebe sets up disciplinary parameters and reduces Gabita's and Otilia's maneuvering space to avoid rape. After the physical examination, it becomes apparent to him and to Otilia that Gabita is beyond the fourth month. This dishonesty only increases Gabita's overall debt-guilt to Bebe. "I don't know, miss." Bebe responds, "It is very dangerous. Who did you think you'd find to do it [short silence] in the fourth, fifth, whatever month it is?" What he means to say is "because your condition is far more medically and legally dangerous, your debt to me will increase." Bebe bargains as if at a bazaar, "But everything in this world has its price." "We'll pay!" Gabita insists, but to her horror she will soon learn that she is also a debtor in a new kind of economy of debt.

Payment:



Establishing the inventory of Gabita's broken promises and positioning himself as the victim, Bebe moves in to close the deal. First, to Gabita's mention of payment, Bebe looks at her with mild surprise, "Young lady, did I mention money? Did I mention money on the phone?" Otilia intervenes with an explanation. Ramona, the friend who recommended him told Gabita the price for his services would be 3,000 lei. To nip the situation in the bud, the girls hope for a monetary exchange. Bebe, turns the conversation to Gabita and to his previous agreement.



Bebe's disciplinary interrogation reveals Gabita's evasiveness about her late pregnancy; his terrorizing brings truth into the open and uses it to further subject Gabita to his perverse desire.



Otilia explains to Bebe that they are short on cash only to realize that money was never to be the means of transaction.

| | |
|--|--|
| | |
| | |
|  <p>Did I mention money on the phone?</p> |  <p>Wait. I'm not sure I understand.</p> |
| <p>Bebe reminds Gabita of their agreement “to work something out” instead of being paid. Bebe uses this agreement as a strategic advantage over Gabita’s desire.</p> | <p>Otilia’s ‘cognitive dissonance’ marks a rupture in the situational frame of reference.</p> |

Before inflicting a shock, Bebe strategically offers a narrative of a ‘mutual aid’ as a rationale for their submission to him. “Young lady, what did I tell you on the phone?... That I understand the situation, and I could help you. Right? Did I mention money?” In response, Gabita reiterates Bebe’s words, “You said we’d work something out.” With Gabita’s confirmation about their agreement, Bebe passes halfway through the very sensitive part of “negotiation.” “Precisely. That is why I asked you to come in person. So that we could work something out.” Gabita should appreciate, he continues, that he does not judge her, since, “In life we all make mistakes.” He has not, he further reminds her, probed into her personal life, “I asked you nothing, not your name, nor the father’s name. It’s not my business.” On the other hand, he had nothing to hide. He came with his card and he left his ID at the reception desk. “If the police come, they’ll get me first. I am risking my freedom.” This would be damaging for him given that he has a family and a child.

“So if I’m nice to you, if I help you, you should be nice to me too, right? That is how I see it.”
“Wait... I’m not sure I understand.”

Otilia senses trouble. To avoid a reversal of the shock therapy so carefully handled, Bebe reminds Gabita about the asymmetry of their strategic relation: he can wait but Gabita cannot, “You are the one in a hurry.” It is too late for any misunderstanding. He leaves no space for the girls’ conversational comeback or for a U-turn in their negotiations. He presses on with his victimization,



Bebe's intention to have sex with both women in exchange for an abortion bounces off Gabita's frightened face.

“What did you think? I risk ten years for 3,000 lei? Is that what you thought? What do you take me for? A beggar? Did you see me begging? Here’s what we’ll do.”

At this point the camera shifts from Bebe to Gabita sitting on the edge of the bed fearfully awaiting what is about to hit her. We hear Bebe’s voice:

“I’ll go the bathroom. When I come out, you will give your answer. If it’s yes, tell me who goes first. If it’s no, I’ll get up and go. It was you who came to me for help.”

The clarity is finally delivered without mentioning the “it.” The part “tell me who goes first” clarifies everything. We see Gabita’s face in horror as she utters, “I feel sick, I can’t believe this is happening.”

Heated negotiations follow as Gabita and Otilia raise the price to 5,000 lei, promising money they don’t have. Bebe rejects it; angrily, he heads to the door. Blocking Bebe’s exit, Gabita finally capitulates: “Please help me fix it... the way you said.” “The way I said?” “Yes, the guilty should pay. I screwed up.” She is suggesting “My friend is under no obligation.” In a stern voice, Bebe utters, “You don’t suggest! If anything, you ask. I said I’d help and explained my terms. If you don’t understand, no one’s forcing you.” To end this painful exchange, Otilia shouts in a crying voice, “Fine! Give her the probe and ...” Bebe asked, “And what? You think I was born yesterday?” Otilia sits on the bed and takes off her shoes. To their horror, the “it” is about to happen. As if in the marketplace, Gabita and Otilia have made their choices and they have closed the transaction.



Gabita experiences a radical shift of situational meaning. The time of catastrophe begins. Everything up to this point reads as a dream about two naïve women believing that money could buy them an escape from an unwanted pregnancy.



Captured by her own desire, Gabita capitulates and accepts the ‘terms’ of the agreement she made with Bebe on non-monetary payment.



“The guilty should pay.” Gabita’s induced guilt is the only bargain. She has to stop Bebe from leaving.



Otilia is ready to “go first” ...

“Mr. Bebe”: allegory of a neoliberal catastrophe

Although Romanian and Western film critics place interpretative gravitas on Otilia and Gabita’s moral predicament, in my view they have failed to appreciate fully the interpretative value of Bebe’s language. For example, Ioana Uricaru

characterizes Bebe's language only as "verbal abuse"[9]; for Doru Pop, Bebe's language is "the cruelest sequence of the movie"[10]; and Dominique Nasta characterizes Bebe's dialogue as "probably the most explicit and crude of the whole film." [11] Western film critics tow the same line. Kristin M. Jones characterizes Bebe "in a frighteningly modulated performance"[12]; Damon Smith registers Bebe as, "increasingly hostile over their inability to pay his asking price"[13]; Ann Hornaday sums up his character as, "alternately practical and monstrous"[14]; while for Stephanie Bunbury he is "the strange, mysterious Bebe." [15]



Frank Booth in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* sings the Roy Orbison hit of the '60s "In dream", a nostalgic signifier of the bygone time much like the tunes played at the hotel's wedding party during the last scene.



Bebe's illocutionary terror as a Romanian replica of Frank Booth's.

To be sure, all these enlisted putative features signify the power of Bebe's cruel masculinity, but they say nothing about its *technology*. As authorized by Mungiu's illocutionary genius, Bebe is comparable only to David Lynch's perverse illocutionary monster articulated by Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) from *Blue Velvet* (1986) in his erotico-terrorizing scream, "Don't you fucking look at me!" Perhaps Parvulescu unknowingly inscribes a nightmarish Frank Booth into Bebe when he observes that "Once Otilia and Gabita leave the dorm, their privacy is stripped from them. The abortionist enacts a nightmarish embodiment of such exposure"[16]—much like, one may add, the one experienced by Dorothy Valence (Isabella Rossellini), who is stripped of her privacy when exposed to the nightmarish Frank Booth in her own apartment. Bebe's type of person would be well known to any Romanian, like Frank Booth, who, according to Lynch, is "a guy Americans know very well." [17] In this vein, Parvulescu describes Bebe as "the ultimate other of real existing communism's atomized society, unmasking its proximity to a contractless Hobbesian state of nature." [18] Similarly yet somewhat differently, Frank Booth, as I would paraphrase, is "the ultimate other of real existing capitalism's atomized society, unmasking its proximity to a contractual Hobbesian legal state."

The liberal words "trust" and "free choice" dominate Bebe's language and allow Gabita and Otilia to come to his submission of their own volition, which Nietzsche locates in the meaning of the German word *Schuld* (which means both "guilt" and "debt"). Although the oral contract between Gabita and Bebe rests on his "barbaric" side of power, Bebe's strategy nonetheless operates within a "liberal situation," like one in the market economy. Gabita has a "choice" not to submit herself to rape by not having an abortion to the same extent that a worker has a "choice" not to work (until he/she signs the contract). What forces Gabita and Otilia to be raped is precisely the forced *guilt* of the contractual relations so dramatically expressed by Gabita's "the guilty should pay." So, by inserting Ceausescu's "absent presence" as a mediating force regulating Otilia and Gabita's silent submission to Bebe's sexual violence, in much the same way "that the social violence of the regime was accepted by women and men alike throughout society," [19] Pop contradicts his own claim that Ceausescu's power did not stem from the perversity of the social contract, but Bebe's did.

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JUMP CUT

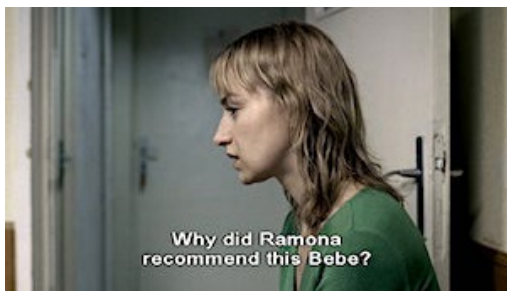
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



To block the sound of Otilia's rape coming from next door, Gabita runs the water, while awaiting her turn to be raped.



Otilia washes herself after her rape, in hygienic completion of the physical ritual sacrifice whereby her debt to Bebe was paid, her stain of psychological degradation can never be washed away.



After the rape and a long and painful silence in the hotel room, the time of reckoning is at hand: "I am curious to know," Otilia asks Gabita as if analyzing a film that she just saw, "Why did Ramona recommend this Bebe?"

The making of indebted subjectivity

At the center of this story is *debt*: a woman's debt to the abortionist, and in the distant background, the nation's debt to its Western creditors. Creating sovereign debt has been at the core of neoliberal strategic dominance.[20] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) Old categories from nineteenth- and twentieth-century revolutionary discourse, such as labor, class society, ideology, were redefined by debt. The neoliberal economy rests not on the exchange of goods, but on credit and contractual relations between capital and labor. In such an economy, the domain of production shifts from the production of goods to the production of the "ethical" debtor or, indebted subjectivity. Considering this new economic paradigm, Mungiu's film becomes very relevant beyond the Communist past.

Structuring the plot along debtor-creditor relations, Mungiu tapped into what Nietzsche called in his *Genealogy of Morals* (1968) "human prehistory"—"the contractual relationship between creditor and debtor, which is as old as the idea of 'legal subjects' and which in turn points back to fundamental forms of buying, selling, barter, trade, and traffic." [21] Debt as a promised payment to a creditor lies at the foundation of communal life. As Nietzsche again put it, "the community ... stands to its members in that same vital basic relation, that of the creditor to his debtor." [22] This "vital basic relation" makes not only woman's procreative debt to the nation possible, but it also makes rape a way for the community to "collect" its debt. In a misogynic economy of pleasure, the woman's body is in permanent debt to a male's sexual desire. If all social relations, as Marx argued, grew out of gender relations, then rape as a perverse power grid in the neoliberal economy of debt must not be a stretch. At the core of this perverse entitlement lies, according to Nietzsche, sadism, "the pleasure of being allowed to vent [one's] power freely upon [another] who is powerless. (...) 'Of doing evil for the pleasure of doing it.'" [23]

The debtor-creditor relation is predicated on the formation of the subjectivity of debt. To this end, a debt economy demands political pressure on the subject's submission to the interest of the creditor. Central to such a barbaric invention of the personal space is a creditor's ability to produce a debtor's moral interior, new subjectivity of debt based on a painful self-submission by inducing "blame," "guilt" and "conscience."

Mungiu concisely and accurately authenticates Bebe's production of Gabita's and Otilia's moral interior filled with guilt. The hotel room conversation between Bebe and the two women breaks down on two disciplinary *a priori*—Bebe's commanding language and Gabita's and Otilia's self-transformation into submission. Bebe's language, like Frank Booth's, discloses almost to the letter the monstrous aspects of language, not as a medium of communication but as a tool of domination.

His language is to be obeyed. Bebe makes this clear to Gabita as soon as he meets her in the hotel room:

"I told you two things on the phone. One, get a room at the Unirea or the Moldova. Two, meet me in person. You think I asked for the sake of it?"



Bebe's quasi-methodic preparation for the abortion displays a mix of quackery and horrifying coldness. With the abortion, the transaction of rape for abortion is completed; this was his end of the bargain. His in situ 'medical' procedures at once reference: a) the relation between the history of medicine and the history of disciplinary society; b) his procedures as infrastructure for his illocutionary terror; and c) the productivity of terror.



Otilia is told that a "lady officer" is looking for her. Otilia missed her period and skipped her required medical exam. Since 1986, Romanian women of childbearing age were subjected to state control of their reproductive functions as a part of overall state austerity measures imposed in order to pay off the national debt to Western banks. State control of Otilia's body reveals the trickle-down debt economy from the global to the intimate context.



Bebe demands "trust" as his precondition for

Unlike Frank Booth's over-the-top shouts, Bebe's whispering voice, full of significant intonations and forced silences and his flat facial expressions and occasional displays of a self-restraining aggression, discloses the monstrosities of Bebe's character, although at the same time, Mungiu maintains a certain free-floating autonomy in Bebe's language. Ceausescu had no copyrights on the Romanian language, nor could he control its use on the fringes of the police state. Such limitations allowed characters like Bebe to become something on the order of an "entrepreneur of language." Bebe shrewdly utilizes a command in order to maximize the victim's submission. This discloses the link between domination and profit.

Bebe reveals another important aspect of capitalism. As we know from the history of South Baptist entrepreneurship, capitalism begins not with an economic calculus but with baptism with something on the order of "incorporeal transformation," a symbolic power to transform the body instantaneously into the sign of its own system, like "the transformation of the passengers into hostages, and of the plane-body into a prison-body." [24] In Bebe's world, it means a symbolic shock aimed at rupturing the girls' pastoral moral boundaries in order to open them up to their future. This is to the new disciplinary system of power based on the neoliberal rape-like economy of debt.

This brings us to the second disciplinary *a priori* regulating the hotel room conversation, Gabita's and Otilia's personal "capital" of submission. For Bebe to enter into relationships of rape with the two women, probably not the first for him, Bebe must have known that he could rationally invest his desire in their hidden capital of submission. To say it differently, when imagining and constructing Bebe's character, Mungiu must have intuited an essential principle of the capitalist economy, namely, that in capitalism, the human becomes a subject investible for capital only if she makes an enterprise of herself through submission. The strategically concocted neoliberal narrative permeates Mungiu's Bebe. Gabita's and Otilia's rationalization and willingness to submit to the non-monetary exchange proves Mungiu's deep inside into the essential function of "human capital" [25] within the neoliberal grid of power, which is based not on economic rationality but on moral submission.

Central to this relationship is the creditor's assessment of the debtor's moral life, his or her daily habits, life conditions, commitments to social mores and conventions. We witness Bebe at the very outset making such an assessment about Gabita's and Otilia's "human capital" to submit: What are they made of and to what extent will his investment pay off?

At first, Bebe introduces himself in an open manner, as an honest man who takes a risk to help a woman in need.

"I have nothing to hide. I came in my own car. You can take my number. It's maybe too late to start again, but I will say this: trust is vital."

Trust is vital for various reasons. First, by getting from Otilia, "You can trust us," Bebe creates an ethical bond between the girls and himself, as if saying, "We are together in this risky and dangerous enterprise." By agreeing in "trust" he has implanted this ethical feature into Gabita's and Otilia's "human capital." It therefore becomes part of who they are, trustworthy women.

Based on this strategic achievement, as we see later, Bebe will return to remedy the crisis of the creditor-debtor relationship when the women insist on monetary payment for the abortion. Because he was "honest" about himself, he expects Otilia to be equally honest about herself and Gabita.

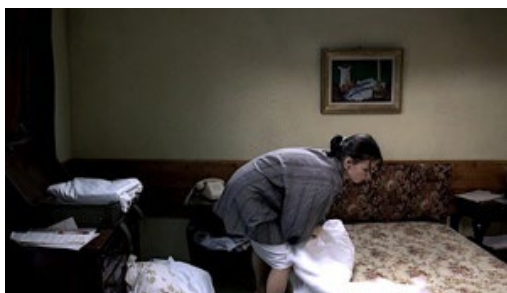
providing an illegal abortion but also a perverse precondition for raping a pregnant patient and her friend.



Mutually confirmed trust assures Bebe about future transactions.



Otilia was raped and it's Gabita's turn to "go second" ...



Before her abortion, Gabita changes bed sheet as if cleaning a 'dirty' bed

"Has your sister ever done this before?" "How old is she?" "You live together?" "But you are not from here?" "Where are you from?" "Are you renting?" "How is it [life in a dorm]?" "What do you study?"

This is all vital information for Bebe's investment. It provides him a measure of their ability to be molded into indebted subjectivities, the extent to which they will "work on themselves" to meet his invested expectations. He is like a wolf, who, upon entering the stable, counts the bodies and calculates his gains.

The creation of "human capital" as indebted-by-guilt subjectivity defines the catastrophe of the debt economy in Mungiu's film. Gabita's submission to the guilt induced by Bebe finally speaks out, "Please help me fix it. . . the way you said, ... the guilty should pay. I screwed up." To her suggestion to spare Otilia, Bebe responds, "You don't suggest! If anything, you ask," meaning that she is not in any position to negotiate. She is weak and he is strong; she is punished precisely because she is weak. By collecting on his debt, Bebe has produced two new subjectivities and a new form of debt. Along the scheme of "disaster capitalism" Bebe has made Gabita and Otilia see themselves as he saw them: as two self-made 'whores.' For that alone they will forever be in permanent debt to Bebe's rapist gaze. Rape will be their secret and Bebe will own their traumatized psyches forever: "We're never going to talk about this, OK?"

Two economies

Mungiu navigates his characters through two economies, explicitly Communist and implicitly neoliberal. It is not a stretch to consider that Bebe's "economic imagination" emulates today's "disaster capitalism" at the time of Ceausescu's forthcoming demise. The only economic argument made in previous reviews of *4 Months*... comes from Parvulescu. He contrasts the students' dorm economy of solidarity with the brutal external economy. He reads in Mungiu's reconstruction of the Communist-era student dorm, a "nostalgic gaze" at the student dorm as "a communist utopia," a "word of solidarity" where "property has minimal value and ... everyone is willing to share" (including the money for Gabita's abortion), proving that Mungiu registers the "side effects" of the Romanian economic context. But, in my view, Mungiu's "nostalgic gaze" is ambiguous.

Debt figures in multiple intersections of, on the one hand, the explicit students' utopian and administrative economies, and on the other hand, explicit and implicit economies. Gabita's and Otilia's debt links opposite ends of the explicit economy. The *lei* is Romanian legal tender which they borrow from their dorm friends to pay for Bebe's services.

Let us consider the trajectory of the two debts related to rape, Gabita's and Otilia's debt to the dorm and to Bebe, in relation to the two opposing types of masculinities, Bebe the rapist and Otilia's boyfriend Adi (Alexandru Potocean), the solidarity-money lender. At first glance, passive Adi stands in sharp contrast to aggressive Bebe. While it is difficult to imagine Adi as a rapist, one can surely imagine (transnationally) a male dorm boyfriend as a rapist. If Mungiu could allow a story about the university professors having sex with their students at the family dinner table, then he must also accept another (transnational) fact that rape is prevalent in the student dorms.

Precisely because of its intimacy-inducing solidarity, student dorms breed rape; statistically speaking, a woman is more likely to be raped by someone with whom she has intimate relations and trust, like a boyfriend, a father, a relative, etc., than by a stranger. I take that Pop reinforces my claim when he writes,



Trauma about the past must remain repressed. The two women must, from now on, stoically accept their neurotic future.



The dorm's informal market of Western goods. Mungiu's nostalgic gaze into the Communist past nurtures future desire for the fetish commodity of present-day global capitalism



The dorm's cold exterior. Under the Communist "fetish of planned economy" everyday life looms as a graveyard.

"In Romania, it has been suggested that a rape is reported every 10 hours, and police records show that there are many violent acts [that] are never even officially recorded." [26]

Were Communist's student dorms excluded? The borrowed money from the pool of the dorm's solidarity, according to the plot and the girls' received information about Bebe's low cost, lures Gabita and Otilia into rape. Shouldn't we infer that the trajectory of the dorm's money, which lead Gabita and Otilia to rape, links on the level of the socially misogynic system of desire Bebe's rape desire with the hidden student dorm's rape desire?

Let me reiterate that Mungiu's intentions are far from clear and that their ambiguities breed perversity honing Bebe's critical edge. When power achieves the total submission of its resisting force, it reveals its abstract "diagram"—a grid of its disciplinary manipulation through which, in this story, Gabita's abortion, despite the rape and all its risks, succeeds. By not showing the actual rape, Mungiu cannot prevent our afterthoughts about the catastrophic productivity of power.

This brings us to the implicit economy in which power is a productive force. The most perverse aspect of the story is precisely the productive aspect of disciplinary power. Bebe's rape made Gabita's abortion *real*. Mungiu created Bebe with the understanding that power produces reality before it represses, while punishment establishes the productive relations of power. Hence, Mungiu's point, much like Foucault's, is that social reality is by definition punitive in nature.

In so far as rape became a punitive currency in the transaction between Bebe and Gabita, Mungiu elevates rape into a working metaphor of the economy of debt in general and, in the case of Bebe, in particular. Perhaps Mungiu unknowingly "stepped" on Bebe's allegory of the Romanian future as if on a hidden landmine, and as a traumatic experience remained repressed underneath the articulated intention. Perhaps the same applies to the previous film analysis.

Bebe: an allegory of post-communist Romania

In her book *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (1996), after her in-depth analysis of post-Communist conditions in Eastern Europe and Romania, Romanian-American scholar Katherine Verdery arrives at an unexpected conclusion:

"My skepticism about whether the former socialist countries are undergoing a transition to democracy and market economy has led me to propose instead the apparently absurd image of a transition to 'transition to feudalism.'" [27]

As an example of her claim, she uses the case of Caritas, "the largest and most far-flung of many pyramid schemes that sprang up in post-Ceausescu's Romania during 1990-1994." [28] As in the case of Bernard Madoff, the founder of NASDAQ (the world's second-largest exchange system) and his Wall Street Ponzi scheme, or in the case of the corporation *Enron*, such pyramid schemes caused massive losses in people's life savings, pension funds, university funds, charity funds, homes and in some instances, it led to suicides, including Madoff's son Mark Madoff on December 11, 2010. In the Caritas case, the founder, Ioan Stoica, a shady figure known before 1989 as "an accountant, a fixer for the Communist



Disciplined into a rape, Otilia assists Bebe in making Gabita's abortion *real*.



On his way out, Bebe gently touches Gabita's leg, a perverse contrast to the camera's cutting off of Gabita's body as if it were the site of a massacre.

Party apparatus, and a black-market currency trader. . . [who]. . . seems to have also done time for embezzlement," invented a "mutual-aid" pyramid scheme promising eightfold growth of the deposited amount of money every three months.

Caritas, according to the Romanian National Bank, in 1993 held "a full third of the country's banknotes." [30] The lowest estimated figure involved around two million depositors, mostly "working-class families and pensioners" many of whom sold their houses and apartments and other valuables and deposited in Caritas a hope that they would be able to buy it back and still have substantial savings left. But Caritas also had a hidden class of participants: "former apparatchiks, current politicians, and the nouveaux riches." [31] While the pyramid lasted, this class with Stioca's help managed to collect their profit in time at everyone else's expense. The outcome of the Caritas collapse in 1994 shaped the Romanian "transition to 'feudalism.'" This financial apparatus transferred millions of *leis* in people's savings into the hands of newly formed "unruly coalitions, less institutionalized, less legitimate, and less stable than parties, [with a] territorial base . . . primarily regional or local rather than national." [32] Now as feudal warlords, they rule over the ruins of Ceausescu's Romania.

While Verdery still maintains the reality of Western democracy and the market economy in contrast to the Romanian "transition to 'feudalism,'" Jean Baudrillard, on the other hand, registers the neoliberal economy of debt as a return to feudalism. "Credit," he argues, "brings us back to a situation characteristic of feudalism, in which a portion of labor is owned in advance, as serf labor, to the lord." [33] This feudalistic rule of owning labor in advance through debt is an ancient rule that goes back to the Barbarian invasions of Europe.

George Duby's analysis of early medieval history credits the Barbarian invasions for the rise of the new economy of debt imposed by force. [34] An entitlement to collect presupposes relationships of domination and subordination. This ancient barbaric right to collect debt by force defines today's financial capitalism in many ways. Consider, for example, the barbaric inscription by the German right to collect the Greek national debt or by U.S. investors to collect Puerto Rico's national debt at the expense of social devastation equivalent to early feudalism. Even though enshrined in contract as the legal base of the capitalist economy, the economy of debt stems from the ability to inflict pain. This right, in Benjamin's register would be a document of civilization, which is also a document of barbarism.

As a motto for her book, Verdery offered the following question-answer: "Q: What is Socialism? A: The longest and most painful route from capitalism to capitalism." After agreeing with Marx's insights about "commodity fetishism" as one of the defining features of capitalism as a state of illusion, she locates a variation of capitalism in the Romanian Communist economy of "plan fetishism." [36] To the same extent that illusion feeds capitalism so "socialist plans generated the illusion that everything is under social control." [37] But unlike in socialism where the government absorbs the blame for economic crisis, the illusion of market exchange in post-Ceausescu Romania would make the economy visible as a non-personal, yet still brutal "force of nature." [38]

So, when Pop makes claim that Bebe represents Ceausescu's "absent present" [39], channeling the system's subhuman forces through abortion and rape onto Gabita and Otilia, one wonders if Pop in fact registers a presence of germinating brutal "force of nature" streaming through the black market economy of the student dorm economy of the "fetish commodity" (the Hollywood movie *East of Eden*, the New Zealand TV show *Thorn Birds*, and ads for Kent, Salem Menthol and

Marlborough cigarettes and Wrigley's chewing-gum) soon to be incarnated in Caritas' Stoica's money fetish.

To the extent that one can argue that the embezzler Stoica is a harbinger of the forthcoming invasion by the "force of nature," Bebe is a harbinger of Stoica. In this story about abortion and a double rape, Bebe is the agency of a "barbarian flow" cracking "the enclosing pastoral shell"[40] of the two innocent women, announcing Stoica's financial rape of the nation. Both criminals navigated Ceausescu's black market economy, they crawled out onto the scene as sexual or economic rapists, skillfully utilizing their lure inside the system of illusion. Because the fetish is an eroticized object, co-extends money into an illusion of ownership of the female body, hence Gabita's and Otilia's rapes become the currency for Gabita's abortion. In doing so, Bebe as allegory of post-Communist Romania teaches us a valuable lesson about the barbaric nature of the debt economy and forecasts the forthcoming Romanian 'feudalism' as confirmed by Verdery.

Abortion and the Romanian economy of debt

As an important authority on the social history of Romanian pro-natalist policies, Gail Klingman sums up their tragic consequence, "In Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania the 'marriage' between demographic concerns and nationalist politics turned women's bodies into instruments to be used in the service of the state." [41] The Romanian economy of debt looms in the background of such a monstrous example of bio-politics.

No European nation after World War Two experienced industry as national catastrophe as did the Romanians under Ceausescu. Many catastrophes begin with a hope for a better life. Ceausescu's hope to transform Romania into a modern, independent nation, where people like Otilia could work and realize their hopes, hinged upon massive industrialization. To this end, East European socialist countries, the USSR and China, as well as Romania, made two strategic turns—first, to move from an agricultural to an industrial economy; and second, in a "strategic opening" toward the West to obtain cheap Western loans for industrial development. Both strategic moves toward quick industrialization faced two challenges, both demographic and financial.

Ceausescu's economic rationale to boost the labor force amid massive industrialization contradicted a normal decline in birth rates. In 1966, the Romanian birthrate dropped to 14.3 per 1,000 from 19.1 per 1,000 in 1960, a decline that stood in the way of Ceausescu's economic policy. The same year the Romanian government introduced Law # 770/1966. The following year 1967, the birth rate went up from 14.3 to 27.4 per 1,000 only to drop in 1983 to the level of 1966. While the forced industrialization of a woman's procreative sexuality might have been economically justified, it was still a monstrous idea. Because of these antiabortion policies between 1965 and 1989, 9,452 women died due to complications related to illegal abortions.[42]

In one of his interviews, Mungiu ponders the abortion ban as a case of Romanian exceptionalism:

"And the Soviet Union promoted sex as a way of relieving social pressure. It was completely different in Romania. Even in Poland, despite the influence of the Catholic Church, the policy was different. This was something specifically Romanian. It's difficult to find a good explanation. But, according to my research, the causes stem from Ceausescu's motivations from 1966 on that were partially economic and partially propagandistic." [43]

But according to my research, the various forms of the legal prohibition of abortion in Romania existed a long time before Ceausescu. Since the union between the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in 1864, antiabortion laws existed in various forms until 1957, when the Communists abolished it. Before Communism, Romanian eugenicists between the two world wars placed the control of woman's sexuality at the center of national security and demanded that the state protect the nation's "biological capital."

Romanian eugenicists used the term "biopolitics" long before Foucault. *Biopolitica* was the title of a book published in 1926 in Cluj by the most prominent Romanian eugenicist Iuliu Moldovan.[44] "The reproductive family," he wrote, "on whose purity our biological future depends, will be placed at the center of biopolitics....". In the words of Marius Turda, "

"The biopolitical axiom shared by Romanian eugenicists and the racial scientist, 'The individual is nothing; the nation is everything,' forcefully illustrates how the national body was planned and subsequently controlled between 1918 and 1944." [46]

This story about Ceausescu's antiabortion law may also be seen as a story about the discursive continuity of Romania's racial history. One should consider the fact that the Ceausescu's pro-natalist policies, as Klingman pointed out, had a hidden racial agenda. Antiabortion measures were more liberal toward Romania's Roma, Hungarian and German population in Transylvania where they constitute a sizeable group of ethnic minorities and have always been a source of Romanian ethnic anxiety; while the Roma population had very high birthrates, the government nonetheless considered this sector's expansion a problematic.

One government report, for instance, evidences racial undertones vis-à-vis the Roma's undesired birthrates, stating, "The exaggerated reproduction is determined especially by their lifestyle, the degree of their social and cultural backwardness." [47] There was a tacit approval of Roma abortion, as Klingman argues. Roma women regardless of age could get an abortion in Arad, a city in Transylvania, where a large Hungarian and German population resided. In other words, antiabortion policies were a national legal tradition tied to the interest of the state regardless of its ideological orientation.

Ceausescu faced neoliberalism as his second challenge. Neoliberalism came into life through a "shock doctrine" of manufactured debt. During two oil crises during the '70s, the OPEC countries flooded Western banks with enormous amounts of cash, inviting the bankers to figure out where to invest it. Because of the decline in industrial investments in the West, the developing countries seemed the best option for foreign investors. At the time, David Graeber writes, "Citibank and Chase therefore began sending agents around the world trying to convince Third World dictators and politicians to take out loans (at the time, this was called "go-go" banking)." [48]

The initial low interest rates skyrocketed overnight to 20% due to the change in U.S. money policies. During the '80s and '90s, this created a debt crisis among the developing countries, including Romania. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) stepped in as a debt enforcer to demand structural adjustments as a precondition for obtaining refinancing. Graeber continues:

"poor countries would be obliged to abandon price supports on basic foodstuffs, or even policies of keeping strategic food reserves, and abandon free health care and free education . . . all of this had led to the collapse of all vulnerable people on earth . . . of looting of public resources, the collapse of societies, endemic violence, malnutrition, hopelessness, and broken lives." [49]

Neoliberalism changed the economic gravitas. The interests of shareholders, bondholders, and other owners of security prevailed over the interests of the welfare state to protect the economic rights of citizens. During the 1970s, the neoliberal transformation of state financing led to a massive increase of national debt of socialist and Third World countries heavily dependent on expensive Western loans. Contrary to its claims of introducing economic regulation, neoliberalism emerged as a new form of power and conquest by means of the debtor-creditor relation.

Unfortunately for Romania, the rise of neoliberalism coincided with the Romanian economic need to increase its debt; unlike other East European countries, like Poland and Hungary, Cornel Ban writes, “Romania only began borrowing on a large scale at a very inopportune time: in 1979 the interest rate shock triggered by the U.S. Fed made cheap development finance unavailable.”[50] Romania became one of the first casualties of the emerging national debt economy, according to Ban,

“... oil and financial shock in the capitalist world percolated through the gas-guzzling Romanian economy and were interpreted as an imperative to disengage from international finance.”[51]

To this end, the Romanian government imposed stringent austerity measures—all produced things were exported, domestic consumption and incomes were reduced, and exported electricity, oil and gas left Romanian homes freezing during the winters. Austerity measures, Ban contends,

“led the regime to adopt policies that eventually threatened its promise to deliver basic economic rights. Unfortunately for the regime, these policies and their consequences eventually contributed extensively to the dramatic anti-regime mass mobilization of December 1989 that pushed the uncivil society to withdraw its commitment to the regime.”[52]

As living conditions worsened, so did antiabortion laws for Romanian women. “The pro-natalist policies introduced by Ceausescu in the 1960s,” Klingman writes, “were a mild version of what was later to become a draconian policy...,”[53] including punishment for the abortionist and those helped in the process. Antiabortion laws and prosecutions of illegal abortions were the Government’s response to conditions favoring abortion. Klingman further points out,

“In 1986, Ceausescu introduced a campaign—unique in the history of Romanian medicine—to analyze the health of the population, particularly that of women between the ages of sixteen and forty-five, the years when most women are fertile. These exams, regardless of officially professed intention, subjected women of childbearing age to state control of their reproductive lives.”[54]

By 1989, not only had Romania paid off its entire national debt ahead of schedule, but it had also accrued nine billion dollars of state surplus. Instead of improving the Romanian standard of living, however, Ceausescu fell prey to the neoliberal virus; he decided to turn Romania into a creditor nation and to use the surplus to provide loans to African countries and to the USSR.[55] On the flip side, Romania’s citizens had to pay off the national debt to the Western banks under stringent austerity measures. To this extent, the Romanian population became captives of the government-enforced creditor-debtor relations. In reality, the Romanian State only regulated this relationship between Western creditors and Romanian labor.

In short, confining the events of rape and abortion to the personal experience of the characters, as Romanian film critics tend to do, glosses over the fact that human intimacy does not rest outside the omnipresent global context. The film accurately authenticates the structural exterior of the story shaping the story's psychological interior on an intimate and personal level. The prohibition of abortion, as the film's dramatic prerequisite, opens a point of tension between the structural and personal and the industrial and sexual, where Ceausescu's desire for Romanian massive, quick industrialization intersects with Gabita's desire for an abortion. The hotel room permeated with risk and fear attests to the moment of infrastructural clash between politico-economic and personal desire. The demand for more labor input and higher birthrates coincides with stricter antiabortion laws.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Bebe's illocutionary terror echoes Frank Booth's in *Blue Velvet*: "Don't you fucking look at me!"



Jeffrey waking up in *Blue Velvet*. His shirt design is an infrastructural detail referencing both the industry of dream making and Jeffrey's dream inside the film.

The mise-en-scène: an "infrastructural unconscious"

In *Blue Velvet*, David Lynch assembles iconic objects from different decades—an ambulance arriving at a crime scene from the '50s, a Montgomery Cliff poster from the '60s on Sandy's (Laura Dern's) bedroom wall, Roy Orbison's hit "In Dreams," Frank Booth's bellbottoms from the '70s, Jeffrey's (Kyle MacLachlan's) narrow tie and his favorite Heinekenbeer from the '80s—to convey a sense of time and, when placed together, to convey the reality of a single dream. Lynch's insight into what might be called "the infrastructural unconscious" of a most advanced "commodity-fetish" society unpacks the ways in which unconscious desires and material objects inscribe each other, molding a cultural matrix on a most ontological level.

Libidinally invested fetish-objects in his film assume illusionary agency but with real consequences; they become ghostly characters telling their own stories. The lyrics of "In Dreams" script an actual interaction between Frank and Jeffrey. When Jeffrey wakes up toward the end of the film on his lawn wearing a short sleeved-shirt printed with the single film frames used in the industry of dreammaking, referencing film montage as the technology of dreams splicing impossible temporal relations, the shirt design acts as the chorus in a Greek drama, announcing, "What you have seen up to this point was only Jeffrey's dream."

Predicated on Verdery's claim about the illusionary nature of capitalism and socialism's fetish-based societies, Lynch's "infrastructural unconscious" seems applicable to Mungiu's film about Communist "fetish-planning" societies.

Born in 1968, two years after the introduction of the antiabortion laws, Mungiu likes to call himself a "child of the decree" (In Scott 2008, 9 of 14) of the Romanian antiabortion laws. As a child belonging to the generation of industrially induced births and as a director who made a film about this history experienced by women opting out of it, Mungiu compressed the sexual and economic, the intimate and political and the personal and artistic into a single plane of immanence whereby one domain inscribes the other. Mungiu inscribes the film as industry with a personal genealogy of Romanian industry as if to say, "As a child of Romanian manufactured births my 'Oedipus complex' belongs to the Romanian industrial-complex." My biography and my intimacy are infrastructural. Taking a cue from Mungiu, the task is how to find and recover his genealogy in the missing industrial aspect of the story about a generational catastrophe inside the national industrial catastrophe.[56][[open notes in new window](#)]

I credit Pop's and Parvulescu's insights into Mungiu's "infrastructural unconscious" inscribed in the film's constructed mise-en-scène. Pop makes a valid observation when he claims that Mungiu constructed his mise-en-scène[57] as a resonance box amplifying emotions or emotional emptiness. Parvulescu makes a similar claim about the mise-en-scène of the student dorm as Gabita and Otilia's safe zone. For instance, he registers industrial objects as personal memorabilia for Mungiu's reconstruction of the Communist past in the student dorm as a mise en scène:

"4 Months... is full of souvenirs from the late days of the Ceausescu

era. (...) The camera takes us through cluttered dorm units, long and dark corridors and shared shower rooms. We are introduced to everyday activities and to hosts of products, staples of the time period. We learn about brands of cigarettes, soaps, hairsprays, shampoos, illegal movie-renting, powdered milk, instant coffee, a pastry; medicine, contraceptive pills, antibiotics and painkillers; dial-pad phones, dorm furniture; and identity cards... *4 Months*... depict the milieu of the dorm as a world of solidarity... However, once Otilia ... and Gabita ... exit this microcosm of objects/fetishes, a different world starts to unfold.”[58]

Agreeing with the claim that Mungiu’s *mise-en-scène* relates to characters and their emotional context, I argue that Mungiu also uses the *mise-en-scène* on the level of a critical concept and its rupturing effects rather than only amplifying their emotions. In fact, both are part of a dynamic whole, whereby an emotional charge is amplified by the *mise-en-scène* setting up the stage for its infrastructural rupture.

Like Lynch’s industrially produced unconscious, the recovery of the student dorm’s past material totality via “the nostalgic gaze” is possible only from Mungiu’s own extraction of the past cultural matrix from his traumatic industrial memories.

Although Parvulescu draws a sharp contrast between the dorm’s infrastructural interior and its infrastructural exterior, nonetheless he correctly sees “the dialectical relation between inside and outside,”[59] i.e., the infrastructural continuity on the level of a critical concept rather than on a personal and emotional level alone. Like language and money, these prerequisite of all industries, have constituted the dorm’s social milieu, and according to Parvulescu’s correct observation, also of Gabita’s and Otilia’s innocent subjectivities; language and money have constituted the dorm’s exterior along the same rules. For example, the psychological comfort of the dorm plays a role in the girls’ naiveté to go along with the abortionist who costs less than other abortionists and who is willing to “work something out.” Just as the Romanian



Bebe offers a “mutual aid” narrative, which anticipates the Caritas Ponzi scheme presented as Romanians helping each other in post-Ceausescu’s Romania.



The last shot: Otilia's look at the camera drags the viewer's voyeuristic gaze into the story.



Mungiu uses money to construct the story rather than just to have money in the story.



Otilia is borrowing money from her boyfriend Adi. Debt is central to this story: a woman's debt to her abortionist, a friend's debt to her friend and in the distant background, the debt of the Romanians to their Western creditors.

depositors' trust in a "mutual aid" scheme promising eightfold profit in three months set them up to Stoica's scam, so Gabita's and Otilia's student dorm naiveté set them up for Bebe's "mutual aid" scam.

Mungiu makes evident the infrastructural continuity in and out of the students' dorm in the very opening shot of the film rich with infrastructural meaning. It shows a pile of money placed next to an aquarium with two fishes on a table in the student dorm room. Much has been said about the aquarium and its metaphor of captivity in connection to the film's last shot, where both women sit after the abortion and rape at the restaurant table in silence "liken isolated little fish caught in an evolving world,"[60] but little has been said about the money in the opening shot.

Sure, the opening shot with the two fish in an aquarium enounces Otilia's and Gabita's entrapment, but the stack of *lei* placed on the table next to the aquarium in the opening shot suggests a monetary aspect to the metaphor of captivity. The silent money tells so much of what is "under the table" about the two characters, about their interpersonal entanglement with each other, with their friends and most importantly, with Bebe.

Mungiu uses the money to construct the story rather than just to have money in the story. From Shakespeare's *Othello* to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, from Frank Capra's *It is a Wonderful Life* (1946) to Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), money as a fetish and source of illusions, as a means of social mobility, prestige, politics and most often as a desired object of crime has appealed to writers and filmmakers addressing the cultural matrix of capitalism. Often a criminal's cynical reason articulates in a critical moment the cultural matrix of capitalism to expose its moral hypocrisy.

For example, in Andrew Dominque's *Killing Them Softly* (2012), the hit man Jackie Cogan, (Brad Pitt), provides one such articulation. The client demands to be paid in full for the kill as agreed at the very moment when Obama giving his acceptance speech in Grant Park in 2008 is playing on the bar's TV:

"This guy wants to tell, we are living in a community. Don't make me laugh. I am living in America, and in America you are on your own. America is not a country. It is just a business. Now you fucking pay me!"

Here the hit man is a social critic of capitalism, despite its social contract, and despite Hannah Arendt's claim that the United States is the most legal state, U.S. capitalism does not and cannot function within the boundaries of the law as long money works as a fetish.

In contrast to Parvulescu's definition of the girls' "innocence," Mungiu is rather cruel. In fact, he punishes the women for their naïve understanding of money as a means of escape from an undesirable pregnancy. As Mungiu makes very clear, language and money are not a means of escape. Rather, they are disciplinary mechanisms of capturing those who desire escape. Stoica did not invent the pyramid scheme. It was there as a money game, as a technology of capturing those who were willing to play—money always circulates within scams.

Fully aware of it, Mungiu does not treat money economically, but rather politically, as a device for capturing desire for the women's impossible escape from rape. In this regard, money parallels Bebe's language's scheme of capture. Money and language are at once the subject's exterior and interior. They are external tools for obtaining certain goals, but they also capture and express the subject's most intimate desires. In short, Gabita vested borrowed money in her desire to obtain an illegal abortion, while Bebe vested his language with his desire



The dorm as a bank of solidarity based on "mutual aid" anticipates the slogan of "mutual aid" in post-Ceausescu's Romania used by the Ponzi scheme known as Caritas to lure millions of Romanians into losing their life savings.



Otilia offers money she does not have to Bebe hoping to buy her and Gabita out of rape; in a moment of desperation, increasing personal debt works as Otilia's political instrument of escape.

to rape. The clash of the two competing desires led to Gabita's and Otilia's personal catastrophes.

Decoding the ways in which these two infrastructural elements compose the characters and story offers the key to unpacking Mungiu's mise-en-scène as the locus of his infrastructural trauma.

By "following the money," we learn about these two friends as the story turns into a catastrophe. Less "anal" about money than Otilia, Gabita does not keep money in her wallet as Otilia does. Instead, she moves it around, from the table to the shelf until she hands it over to Otilia. Orderly and reliable by nature, Otilia masterminds and multitasks the entire event which is about to unfold. We also learn that Gabita and Otilia borrowed the money from their dorm friends, including Otilia's boyfriend Adi; "I'll pay you back from my grant" she responds after receiving an envelope with 200 lei.

Borrowing an additional 200 lei becomes an issue in the hotel room after they incur unexpected expenses related to the room. The money further brings drama over the payment. In the heat of the argument with Bebe, Otilia offers 5,000 lei to Bebe, money they do not yet have and which will require borrowing an additional 2,000 lei in just a few days.

"Is 4,000 enough? 5,000? How much?"

"You have that kind of money?"

"We'll borrow it."

"Borrow it? You complain that hotel is 100 lei more, but you can get 2,000-3,000 just like that? How do you plan to get it?"

"We'll borrow."

"And pay it back how?"

"That's my business."

"How soon can you get it?"

"Next Saturday at least."

"All of it, by next Saturday?"

"Yes."

Bebe and Otilia's exchange over the money sets up the prelude to the rape; the ancient drama between "haves" and "have nots" is replayed as a clash of antithetical characters and desires, and yet their roles and the outcome of the conflict are historically predictable. At the end of the drama, resistance ceases and submission begins. Their time has expired and the rape releases tension into a monstrous tranquility.

The signs "written on the dorm room table" activate the post-catastrophic analysis in the same way that Jeffrey's shirt in *Blue Velvet* activates the post-dream analysis. The stack of borrowed money lying next to the aquarium now is deemed obsolete, an object of false hope, a depot of trashed desire, and yet its obsolescence renders the aquarium metaphor up to date. Behind Gabita's, Otilia's, and the viewer's assumptions that the borrowed money will buy an abortion, Mungiu hides the cause of the catastrophe and allows the film to roll in pre-rape time; as soon as we enter post-rape time, the meaning of the opening shot changes. Now



A long silence filled with pain accompanies the birth of two transformed female subjectivities.

one can see Bebe's rape desire lying in wait inside this infrastructural fraternity between the money and the aquarium in the girls' dorm room. In retrospect, the same can be said for the two beds in the hotel room set up for a double rape.

Marx theorized money as a fetish generating the world of allure and illusion. The importance of Bebe's refusal to accept money allows Mungiu to eliminate money's purchasing value in order to reduce it to a pure illusion. Instead he follows the trail of money and registers an accumulation of activities, trust and hope, all leading to a trap. It works, on the other hand, as an archive of retroactive truth, like dream analysis. After the long and painful silence in the hotel room, the time of awakening arrives: "I am curious to know," Otilia asked Gabita as if analyzing a film that she just saw, "Why did Ramona recommend this Bebe?" only to arrive at the unknown mechanical cause, at the glitch of their catastrophe:

Otilia: "I am just upset things ended up this way, because of your stupid ideas. We could have gone to Mrs. Jeni or whoever Dorina mentioned, could have done it differently."

Gabita: "It's easy to say that now. But remember, you agreed, you said if Bebe was cheaper, so what if he was a guy?"

One truth becomes clear: the money lures in the subject down to his or her coordinates of submission within the pyramid of wealth, power and gender, much like in Stoica's pyramid. Why a close friend would recommend to another close friend a rapist as an abortionist translates into why a close friend would recommend depositing personal savings into Caritas? It turns out that Otilia's concern about money is what "chose" the cheaper Bebe. A poor person's desire to save money explains Otilia's as well as Stioca's depositors' financial motivations.

Once again, the money charted the trajectory of their moral drama. As in a thriller a manipulated to kill road sign on a foggy night luring a driver over a cliff, the money lures Gabita and Otilia into a rape just as it lured two million Romanians to bankruptcy. Paying for an extra bed in retrospect marks the two-bed hotel room as the lending location of the two bodies already in free flow. Unfortunately for Gabita and Otilia, the solution to their problem belongs to a currency that belongs to a different economy.

Ironically, Mungiu locates the real value of money inside the student dorm. Only there is this constitutive instrument of the market economy and means of exploitation circulating in the opposite direction. At least Parvulescu sees it that way,

"the dorm as a world of solidarity, a protective matrix endowed with many features of a communist utopia, where money and basic needs never seem to be a problem (problems are usually overcome by mutual help). Property has minimal value, and even though there is commerce, everyone is willing to share." [61]

Gabita and Otilia borrow the money for the abortion from this pool of solidarity, from this spatial and temporal "utopian niche of the dorm." [62] The notion that borrowing money might help Gabita to obtain an abortion, from the post-rape perspective, turns out to be an illusion, a compass for the wrong roadmap. In retrospect, the entire misconstrued plan was cooked up inside "the utopian niche of the dorm."

As it was in Cogan's film, in Mungiu's film money is an instrument of lure, deception and rupture, but unlike in Cogan's film, the money is economically impotent for exchange just as Frank Booth is sexually impotent for sexual intercourse. Here comes Mungiu's extraordinary insight. By making money

economically impotent, Bebe's cruel intention reveals money as a pure fetish. As such, Bebe unleashes the attached Eros from the fetish of money into rape.

With this powerful insight, Mungiu challenges the notion cherished by the neoliberal narrative today that creditor-debtor relations are relations of fair exchange. This notion collapses in the face of Otilia's and Gabita's rapes. Sure, dorm friends helping dorm friends, lending money to bail each other out is a human detail of solidarity captured by the system in which those at the bottom of the food chain, let's say Gabita and Otilia, will eventually be, putatively put, 'fucked over' (think of Greece or Puerto Rico today) not as an exception to the rule, but as a rule itself; hence, bankruptcy laws, austerity measures, imprisonment, torture and assassinations.

Which Romanian women?

Let me in conclusion recap the argument. Romanian and non-Romanian film critics unanimously frame *4 Months...* as a film about two young women's resistance to the oppressive Communist regime which denied them their human rights to free speech and to contraception, symbolized in the very act of brutal abortion and rape. As Pop sums it up,

"Like the actions of Otilia and Gabita, who performed abortions as forms of painful resistance against an authoritarian regime, which was imposing on women a behavior (sexual and reproductive) that was considered unacceptable by them, there is another example of this type of woman's resistance against male authority." [63]

While not denying the regime's oppression, my disagreement is on the level of interpretation and on the level of the concept of power. On the level of interpretation, the film registers more than Communist power. On the level of the concept, while critics' view of power operates within the assumed binaries of legitimate power based on social contract versus Ceausescu's personal power of "a contractless state of nature" (Paevulescu 2009, 6 of 11), power is not personal, rather, it is a *relation* of forces beyond the legalistic "good and evil." Its application, that is its disciplinary tactics and strategies, pressing on many points inside a social body produces realities as a disciplinary order. On the basis of the consequences of Gabita's and Otilia's transformations into "the subjectivity of debt," Bebe's disciplinary tactics and strategies belong to the debt economy of power. In this regard, rather than "resistance" Gabita and Otilia enacted a "radical submission" to the power based on contract; their subjugation prepared them for the Romanian neoliberal future.

So, what is the post-Ceausescu mode of victimization of Romanian women? After many Romanians lost their guaranteed jobs due to neoliberal privatizations, and after they lost their private wealth due to Caritas, many immigrated to Western Europe seeking employment, saving money and sending it back home to the rest of the family to build or rebuild houses, pay bills, or deposit to Caritas. In cinema, one such Romanian woman immigrant in France is Maria, whom Michael Haneke's *Code Unknown* (2000) captures begging on a Paris street corner. Her "radical submission" is evident in her passive acceptance of her humiliation by a French teenager Jean (Alexandre Hamidi) who discards a piece of wrapping paper onto her lap as if she were a garbage container. Her passivity is not a Christian resistance, which Pope saw in Otilia (2014, 142), but rather an immigrant's disciplined submission; although the nation of universal human rights *par excellence* protects her right to protest, she remains silent.

Later, Maria unpacks her humiliating existence to her Romanian immigrant friend. Once, when she was begging on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, she narrates

Images from *Code Unknown*:



A young French man, Jean, dumping trash into Maria's lap. Maria is begging on the 'immigrants' street-corner Gulag' of Paris in a society founded on the "Rights of Men." Maria's humiliation echoes Gabita's and Otilia's humiliations.



Amadou, an African immigrant from Mali who acts on behalf of Maria's dignity, attests to the solidarity among the immigrants in the face of the cruelty and humiliation inflicted by neoliberal society.



Maria's humiliation causes her arrest and deportation to Romania. Her hopes to escape Romanian neoliberal reality replicate Gabita's and Otilia's false hopes to escape Communist reality.



Amadou's arrest. While his gesture resembles the political posture of the East European dissident standing up for human rights, his arrest for doing 'good thing' speaks to the punitive rather than emancipatory character of a neoliberal society.

in a crying voice,

“A man was about to give me 20 francs. But when he saw my outstretched hand, he threw the bill into my lap as if I nauseated him. I rushed back here and hid myself in the attic. I cried my eyes out all day.”

Rather than defending her pride, she learned how to swallow her humiliation. This is the debt she owns to the nation which has loaned her a street corner. As Elena Del Rio notices,

“Maria does not always appear as an immigrant in the film, but when she does, she is stripped of her dignity and her capacity for joy and action. Whether sitting on the sidewalk as a street beggar or handcuffed and deported back to Romania, Maria is the extreme instance in the film of the notion of ‘bare life’ theorized by Agamben.”[64]

In Haneke's film *Amadou* (Ona Lu Yenke), an African immigrant from Mali, acts on behalf of Maria's dignity and confronts Jean in an encounter that immediately turns into a scuffle. The police arrive, Maria is handcuffed and deported to Romania, Amadou is arrested and detained, but Jean is left unquestioned. One may say that in this scene Amadou replicates the political posture of the East European dissident standing up for human rights in the face of Communist oppression; the difference, one would assume, is that French law would compel the police to detain Jean. Instead, power acts from within local disciplinary apparatuses, not as a force of justice but as an instrument of punishment, as a force of humiliating submission. Because Maria was unable to obtain a license to distribute newspapers exposed her to the barbarism of an administrative deportation to Romania. If you have seen both films, you can feel Bebe's "absent presence" in the cruelty of the legal system and see Gabita and Otilia's humiliations inscribed on Maria's humiliated face.

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Notes

1. During the Cold War, the West recognized Eastern Europe solely in terms of dissident discourse about Communism's repression of (dear to the liberal democracies) civil rights. Repressed subjectivity, in dissident discourse, became the sole point of critical entry into the Communist regime. However, Communism is no longer a threat to Romania. Putin is not Lenin but a neoliberal oligarch as is Jeff Bezos the owner of Amazon or Bill Gates the owner of Microsoft. The threat instead is neoliberalism, yet old habits die hard. Betrayed by Communism's broken promise about a humane society, dissident discourse re-appropriates the humanism of the repressed subject to mount a critique of Communism while it glosses over the oppressive conditions of subjectivity today. In fact, Romania today looks like any other East European neoliberal state. As a member of the EU and NATO, Romania hosts the U. S. Patriot Defense Missile system directed at Russia. Along Poland, Romania also hosts CIA "Black Sites." Romanian national debt in 2006 was 12,30% of GDP in 2017 is 37.1% of GDP. [[return to page 1](#)]
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3. Doru Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema. An Introduction*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Press 2014. 144.
4. Dominique Nasta, *Contemporary Romanian Cinema. The History of an Unexpected Miracle*, London: Wallflowers Press, 2013. 196.
5. Film Catcher interview with Cristian Mungiu at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7YzgdAJErA> (Accessed October 3, 2017)
6. Richard Port, "Not Just an Abortion Film: An Interview with Cristian Mungiu," *Cineaste*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2008). 37
7. Doru Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema. An Introduction*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Press 2014. 201.
8. Kristin M. Jones, "Review: *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*," *Film Comment* (January/February 2008) <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/review-4-months-3-weeks-and-2-days-cristian-mungiu/> (Accessed October 3, 2017)
9. Iona Uricaru, "*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*: The Corruption of Intimacy." In *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2008). 16.
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A film poster for *Winter Jasmine*.



Women's mobility and autonomy on Manchukuo's film screens

by [Yue Chen](#)

Manchukuo was a nominal nation-state installed inside Chinese territory by the Empire of Japan. It lasted from 1932 to 1945. During its very short history, Manchukuo witnessed a flourishing of film production. Soon after Manchukuo's establishment in 1932, Manchurian Motion Pictures Association[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] was founded in 1937. Funded by the Manchukuo government and South Manchurian Railway Corporation,[2] Man'ei was a "National Policy Company," whose film production was supposed to promote "national policy." [3] From 1937 to 1945, when the Allied Army defeated Japan, Man'ei produced hundreds of feature films. Although most of the Man'ei films are not accessible now, existing films and film synopses reveal that majority of Man'ei's feature films focused on the representation of women in the city.[4]

The figure of the "new woman" who has autonomy and mobility is central to Manchukuo's films. While the official idea of womanhood in Manchukuo promulgated an ideology of "good wife wise mother" in accordance with Japanese imperial propaganda, in Manchukuo's economic reality, industrialization demanded female labor in the workplace rather than wives or mothers in the domestic sphere. Industrialization turned agricultural labor into proletarian labor, and modern transportation made migration and mobility possible. The car, train, and steamship enabled women to commute between home and work and also sent them to the metropolis and out into the world. In Japan's imperial project, Manchukuo's industrialization provided material resources for the empire and supported its imperial war in East Asia. At the same time, industrial capitalism facilitated Manchukuo's own urbanization and precipitated the formation of new notions of womanhood, family and emotion. The new nation's establishment needed new citizens for nation building.

Manchukuo film constructed an image of the new citizen particularly through representing the new woman, liberated from male domination and striving for independence and equality through her hard work. The new nation-state was portrayed in this cinema as a multi-ethnic "paradise" in terms of gender equality and class equality, one where women can claim her personal sovereignty. Thus, perhaps unwittingly, the nation's cinema indicated a direction for an alternative social solidarity despite its overall haunting imperial propaganda. This essay examines Manchukuo's films with a focus on their depiction of woman and industrialization, scrutinizing women's relation to Manchukuo's modernity.

Women and women's image in East Asian films are intimately tied to East Asian modernity. The mass media have usually connected the modern girl, *moga* in Japanese, to sexual and economy autonomy and regarded her as a threat to Japan's patriarchal society. This fear/resentment toward the *moga*, according to Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, has represented Japan's anxiety about Westernized

A photo of Ri Koran, the film star of Manchukuo. From an English Magazine *Manchuria* published in Manchukuo.



A film still from *All's Well that Ends Well*. Old Lady Wu's family sits together and reads the news of the EXPO from the capital city.



"Granaries in Yard of Grain-Broker. Kungchuling." A Manchukuo postcard.



One postcard from a set of "Custom in Manchoukuo [Manchukuo]." This image illustrates the harvest of soy beans.

culture and modernity (Wada-Marciano 2005, 15-24). The working woman in urban space was also seen as "the perfect accompaniment to a metropolitan atmosphere." As Barbara Sato comments, even the male intellectual saw "women as accessories rather than as individuals in their own right" (Sato 2003, 120). In China, the varying images of the Modern Girl were subject to the coming of capitalism and imperialism. In her essay, "The Failed Modern Girl," Tze-lan Sang demonstrates that this image in modern Chinese literature and film has reflected the shifting definition of the modern and the nation in early 20th century. Because of her "unconventional sexuality" was like that of a Japanese *moga*, Chinese mass media also portrayed the professional woman as the decadent modern girl. More important, the tragedy of "the failed modern girl" in popular novels revealed stagnant class mobility in urban China. "[T]he Modern Girl is not just a new gender but also a new class category." It is "an identity so thoroughly defined by socioeconomic privilege," and "is impossible to inhabit for those with lesser means" (Sang 2008, 200).[5]

The Korean woman's relation to modernity was also complicated by Japanese imperialism and Korean nationalism in Japanese-occupied Korea. According to Young-Sun Kim, although Korean women were emancipated from the Neo-Confucian family and won an opportunity to get an education and to work, they were still subordinated to male-centered nationalism and Japanese imperialism. One reason, according to Kim's discussion of Korean women and Korean colonial modernity, was that Korean colonial Modernity was shaped by the conflict between yet conspiracy of male-centered nationalism and coloniality. In order to fight against the cultural politics of colonial assimilation, the nation was ideologically constructed as a homogeneous "pure-blooded" family. Korean nationalists appropriated the Japanese imperial discourse of "good wife wise mother," and assigned to women the role of keeping the blood of the nation "pure" within the family. In the contestation and negotiation between Korean nationalism and Japanese colonialism, Korean women were still confined to the domestic sphere by a capitalistic gendered division of labor (Kim 2009, 205-233).

On the East Asian screen of the time, the woman in the modern city tended to be either a consumer with no restraint or an object of sexual consumption, as if the modern woman were usually a helpless victim of modernity. In Japanese film, she could be an "office lady" in a pharmaceutical company who is constantly harassed by her boss (*Osaka Elegy*, aka. *Naniwa hika*, dir. Mizoguchi Kenji, 1936). In Korean film, *Sweet Dream* (aka. *Mimong*, dir. Yang Ju-nam, 1936) tells a story of a middle class housewife who destroys her own life and her family. In Shanghai film, neither the educated professional woman in the *New Women* (aka. *Xin nüxing*, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1935) nor the single mother in *The Goddess* (aka. *Shennü*, dir. Wu Yonggang, 1934) could escape from poverty and gender inequality; these characters had to sell their bodies in exchange for their children's well-being or education, eventually committing suicide (*New Women*) or being thrown in jail (*The Goddess*).

"No positivity, no universal woman independent of man could exist under the terms of the recoded Victorian sex binary" in modern Chinese culture, according to Tani Barlow, because the modern notion of woman, *nüxing*, only existed as the "other" to Chinese man in order to assert the male self (Barlow 1994, 264-267). In Japan, the image of modern girl in the "woman's film" also functions as a Western Other that assists Japanese audience to assert a Japanese national identity (Wada-Marciano 2005, 24). This opposition of self/other and masculine/feminine have long been coded in the West's representation of West/East. In her essay "Seeing Modern China, Toward a Theory of Ethnic Spectatorship," Rey Chow points out that Julia Kristeva's apparent favoring of China is actually sexualized: "China is counterposed to the West not only because it is different," but also because it is "feminine." Kristeva's feminization of Chinese culture, for example,



"A Street View of Chuo-Dori (Main Street). Shinking [Xinjing]." A Manchukuo postcard.



"Manchukuo's Folk Song." A colored postcard that depicted Manchukuo's pastoral life with the lyrics of a folk song.

resonates with Bernardo Bertolucci's film, *The Last Emperor*. Rey Chow's reading of *The Last Emperor* evinces that, by feminizing the space and the spectacle associated with Puyi, the last emperor of Qing Empire and the late monarch of Manchukuo, the film perpetuates China as "a timeless 'before'" — and forever "the other" to western modernity (Chow 1991, 18).

Sang's "failed modern girl," the victimized young women in modern East Asian films, and the feminization of Chinese culture in contemporary Western film all demonstrate an interpretation of women's relation to modernity, in which "modern" Chinese women are subject to capitalism and imperialism instead of feudal patriarchy. As Sang points out, stagnant social and class mobility prevent lower-class women from ascending to the middle class. Sato, Wada-Marciano, and Kim's studies also reveal that a still-patriarchal society does not provide an equal opportunity for women to participate in the public sphere. This is why professional women in East Asian magazines and tabloids are usually depicted as decadent modern girls and portrayed as victims of industrialization and urbanization on the screen. Rey Chow further reveals that not only are Chinese women "otherized" to western modernity but also China and Chinese culture are otherized through feminization.

Seeing modern women's obstacles in the 1930s, the Jiangxi Soviet, a fugitive regime that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established inside the Republic of China at that time, promoted women's empowerment in order to mobilize peasant women in the war against the Kuomintang regime. Their policy helped "the peripheralized sign of woman" stand also for independence by making women into "a category of political praxis" (Barlow 1994, 270). Using *funü*/woman to replace *nüxing*/woman, the state's political practices designated *funü*/woman to have a more democratic position "through democratic rhetoric within a renovated statist family." Even peasant women "achieved revolutionary transformation through social production" (ibid., 272).

While CCP's utopian experiment politicized the reconstitution of the rural family by resolving gender inequality, cultural production in Manchukuo, the experimental regime installed by Japan inside of Chinese territory, also aimed at women's empowerment for the sake of nation building. Manchukuo's cinema resonated with its magazines and newspapers, creating an image of a modern woman who is embraced by the modern city and urban culture. She joins the capitalist working force rather than being the modern economy's victim. At the same time, this image of the independent working woman contradicts the image of "good wife, wise mother" that Japanese imperialism imposed onto Manchukuo. Official gender policy in Manchukuo demanded women's subordination. The "Women's Association of Manchukuo's National Defense" called for women to

"champion women's virtue. In the domestic sphere, [women] should maintain the virtue of Oriental women for the purpose of facilitating family life. In the public sphere, [women] should be loyal to the emperor and the country for the purpose of supporting national defense" (Shan 2013, 16).[6]

In contrast to this imperial promotion of "good wife wise mother," intellectuals in Manchukuo argued that men and women should share equal responsibility in both the domestic and public spheres. Since men and women were equally independent citizens in the society, they appealed to the "good husband wise father" to achieve gender equality (Xu 1944, 38). This appeal for gender equality was meant to defy official versions of womanhood. Nevertheless, the image of the independent woman was allowed in Manchukuo because Japan's imperial expansion in East Asia relied on Manchukuo's industrial and agricultural



"Marusho Department Store, Mostovaya St., Harbin." A Manchukuo postcard.



"Yamato Hotel with every modern accommodation." A Manchukuo postcard illustrated a hotel in Harbin.



Monument to Patriots [Patriots] Kobayashi and Kogo. Harbin." A Manchukuo postcard depicting the Japanese imperial presence in Harbin.

production, thus needing Manchukuo's female labor.

However, seeing the working woman on the screen left room for Manchukuo audiences to imagine sovereignty, from the personal level to the national level. One might consider my interpretation as too ideal and think, to borrow Siegfried Kracauer's analysis, that such an image "disguises the sites of misery in romantic garb so as to perpetuate them" (Kracauer 1995, 295). Yet, Manchukuo was not Weimar Germany; the contradiction between its own longing for sovereignty vs. Japanese colonialism also made it different from Korea or Taiwan, Japan's other two colonies. As a newly established nation-state, the people of Manchukuo had to construct their own nation and define their national identity, and this national identity was not necessarily Japanese. In these circumstances, an enunciation of independence and personal sovereignty in Manchukuo's cinema constantly deviates from the dominant imperial discourse. And usually in film this enunciation is tied to a woman.

Independence and sovereignty personified by working women betray the intrinsic paradox of Japanese imperial policy in Manchukuo. On one hand, imperial power strives to consolidate its domination in the colonial state; on the other hand, the empire is determined to legitimize its colonization of Manchuria through the installation of a nominal nation-state. This contradiction is also reflected in the establishment of Manchukuo's film industry. As a national policy company in Manchukuo, Man'ei encounters a dilemma of allegiance. A national policy company in *Japan* indubitably serves Japanese national policy, which is Japan's expansion in East Asia. However, Man'ei is a national policy company of *Manchukuo*; thus, it is supposed to champion Manchukuo's national policy, which includes the construction of Manchukuo's national identity and the promotion of Manchukuo's national independence. Funded by Mantetsu, Man'ei is compelled to serve Japan's imperial interests.[7] Meanwhile, Man'ei is also the "motion picture corporation of Manchuria," "to produce films for Manchukuo's people" (Yamaguchi 2006, 132-133).[8] To make film for the Empire of Japan or to make film for Manchukuo? This is the question Man'ei faces.

In this essay, we will see how such a contradiction of allegiances unexpectedly allows the image of working women to become the cultural representation of Manchukuo's colonial modernity. At Japan's periphery, Man'ei's cinema creates an unprecedented space where independent working women are able to personify Manchukuo's autonomy. This is what makes Manchukuo cinema unique in East Asia at the time. Thus, one productive way of reading Manchukuo's unique colonial modernity is to approach women's roles on Manchukuo screen as working women. Their roles as productive workers, autonomous and mobile in public space, best exemplify Manchukuo's political claims of national sovereignty.

Because most of Man'ei productions were not accessible after World War II, previous scholarship on Man'ei cinema mainly studied the joint-productions between Man'ei and the major Japanese film studio. Thus, Man'ei is usually simplified in that it is described as an exceptional branch of the Japanese film industry. These studies also tend to focus on the propaganda function of its most famous star, Ri Koran (aka. Li Xianglan, or Yamaguchi Yoshiko) as well as Man'ei's notorious president, Amakasu Masahiko. Thus, the studies usually ignore the representation of Manchukuo society and people in the actual cinematic texts (Sato 1985; Yamaguchi 1989; Stephenson 1999; High 2003).



Cover of *Manshu Travel* magazine.



"Sight of Kungchuling Station, Kungchuling." A Manchukuo postcard.



"The Sungari River in Summer." A Manchukuo postcard showcases the summer view of Sungari River (Songhua Jiang) in Harbin.

Other scholars, writing from the perspective of Chinese film history, believe Man'ei was the agent of Japanese imperialists, culturally enslaving local peoples (Hu and Gu 1999). With an emphasis on transnationality, for example, Michael Baskett contextualizes Manchukuo's film industry as an integral part of Japanese imperialism, soliciting the people of Japan-occupied East Asia to actively participate in the Japanese imperial enterprise (Baskett 2005). The Man'ei study by Furuichi Masako in Peking University is the most recent Chinese-language scholarship, which, reiterates such a theme about Man'ei cinema's propaganda imperatives (Furuichi 2011). Even Ri Koran's film image is invariably read, in the multilingual scholarship on Manchukuo cinema, through the lens of Japanese imperialism.

Doubtless, Japanese imperialism is a foundational factor of Manchukuo film production. Doubtless, too, the subordination of women is an aspect of imperial enterprise and colonial projects. However, one cannot ignore the fact that in many Manchukuo films, women enjoy equal liberty to the male citizen. This imagination of gender equality transcends its historical limitations by challenging the sexual division of labor perpetuated by liberalism as it relates to industrial capitalism. That is, as Wendy Brown points out perceptively in her critique of the hidden gender bias of liberalism,

"[Women are] bound over time [not only] to relationships they are born to honor and tend, confined spatially to caretaking and labor in the household, but women are also bound symbolically to the work their bodies are said to signify; in this sense, [they] are without the mark of subjective sovereignty, the capacity to desire or choose" (W. Brown 1995, 154).

Interesting, as an historic contrast, while Brown is pessimistic about liberalism's gendered nature, its denial of women's right to "desire or choose," the working women in Manchukuo's cinematic imagination seem capable of taking the opportunity that modern liberal society provides and claiming their personal sovereignty in the film world.

Here are a few examples: On screen, a Manchukuo woman can appear as

- a white-collar worker in a Tokyo office (*Journey to the East*, aka *Dong you ji*, dir. Otani Toshio, 1939),
- a teacher who saves orphans (*The Song of Soochow*, aka *Suzhou zhi ye/ Soshu no yoru*, dir. Nomura Hiromasa, 1941), or
- an athletic and intelligent woman who educates a Japanese young man (*Winter Jasmine*, aka *Ying chun hua/ Geishunka*, dir. Sasaki Yasushi, 1942).

Freed from the domestic domain, these female characters participate in social production as model citizens. Whereas consumer culture has appropriated female desires through commodification and early Hollywood film solicited women as consumers in a way that opened a space for expressive agency, Manchukuo's cinema defines women as *producers*, rather than *consumers of modernity* (Hansen 1991, 14, my italics).

Below, I shall scrutinize the cinematic construction of women in Manchukuo's

cinema, situating its representation of new gender roles between the processes of Manchukuo's nation-building and Japan's imperial project of the "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere." One Man'ei film, *Winter Jasmine*, will be a gauge of my comparison of the image of working women in Mizoguchi Kenji's *Osaka Elegy* (aka Naniwa hika, 1936), and Kurosawa Akira's *The Most Beautiful* (aka Ichiban utsukushiku, 1944). Another Man'ei film, *All's Well that Ends Well* (aka Jie da huan xi, dir. Wang Xinzhai, 1942), will be read side by side with Ozu Yasujiro's *The Only Son* (aka *Hitori musuko*, 1937) and form the foci of my reading of women's mobility and her relation to the nation's modernity.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Women in the city



Bai Li's autonomy and competence. *Winter Jasmine* (Sasaki, 1942).



The representation of gender equality in Manchukuo's film. *Winter Jasmine*.

Colonial relations are often coded as gendered. The colonizer assumes dominant power through masculine control, conquering the colonized through physical force, intellectual superiority or charismatic sexuality. The colonized, usually a biological woman, is compelled to devote herself to the colonizer by sacrificing her body, love, and life. This colonial pattern of gender domination and devotion recurs in the storylines of numerous Japanese “national policy films” during the Sino-Japanese War. Ri Koran, the transnational film star in Japan, China, Manchukuo, Taiwan and Korea during the wartime, won fame in Japan by her performance of the colonized Chinese girl in the “Continental Trilogy”—*Song of White Orchid* (dir. Watanabe Kunio, 1939), *Night of China* (aka *Shina no yoru*, dir. Fushimizu Osamu, 1940) and *Vows in the Desert* (aka *Netsusa no chikai*, dir. Watanabe Kunio, 1940)—joint-productions between Toho and Man’ei production companies. In *Night of China*, a young Chinese woman at first resisted a Japanese young man’s kindness because of her anti-Japanese sentiment but is eventually tamed after she is slapped in the face by her suitor. Though the colonizer’s blatant abuse was well received by a Japanese audience, the Chinese audience was deeply offended. In fact, this film did not get to screen in the first-class cinema in Jing’ansi area in Shanghai, because even the Japanese colonial film censor knew that the Chinese market would not buy such power dynamics between men and women, Japan and China (Yamaguichi and Fujiwara 1988, 26).

A mere two years after *Night of China*, however, the joint-production between Shochiku and Man’ei, *Winter Jasmine*, was released to the public in Manchukuo and Japan. In this Shochiku style *shoshimin eiga* (middle class film) about ordinary people’s family and professional life in Manchukuo, the gender-power relation is totally reversed. *Winter Jasmine* is unique in this regard because it draws a contrast between a Manchurian family and a Japanese family, as well as trace the gender dynamics between a Manchurian woman and a Japanese man. The same Ri Koran plays the Manchurian woman, Bai Li. Although she was submissive in the “continental trilogy,” Ri Koran’s Bai Li in *Winter Jasmine* is strikingly superior to the Japanese young man, Murakawa. As an indigenous Fengtian girl, Bai Li assumes the role of a pedagogue. She cultivates, enlightens, and attracts the man from the cosmopolitan center of Tokyo, but eventually turns down his love. In terms of film plot, the script radically reverses the gendered colonial relation central to “national policy film.” Also implicit in this narrative revision is the geopolitical relation between Manchukuo and Japan. Unlike previous Man’ei productions that eulogize Japanese colonization, *Winter Jasmine* highlights Manchukuo’s sovereignty by depicting Manchurian woman’s independence and mobility.

The film production company’s conflicting allegiances to the imperial Japanese government, the colonial government of Manchukuo, and the occupying Japanese military (Kwantung Army) could explain in part *Winter Jasmine*’s distinctive representation of gender relation and colonial relations. Although some Chinese scholarship reads the film as colonial romance (Pang and Wang 2010) and others turn new attention to its urban geography (Li 2010, 117-124; Zhang 2010, 140-144), the personal sovereignty of working women in *Winter Jasmine* and its metaphoric significance for Manchukuo’s colonial modernity remain understudied. What I try to argue with my close reading of this film is the

following: *Winter Jasmine*'s cinematic arrangements have made the film an unwitting story of Manchurian modernity and gender equality, undercutting the directorial intention of promoting the "Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere" and Japanese immigration to Manchukuo.

Winter Jasmine focuses on a playful young man's moving to Manchukuo. Although Murakawa, the film's male protagonist, is a graduate of the most prestigious school in the metropolitan state, Tokyo University, his family believes that life in Manchukuo will make him a better man. He comes to Fengtian as an engineer working at his uncle's company in Manchukuo. Like every settler, Murakawa encounters cultural shock and linguistic problems in a far-flung place, but with the help of a kind and beautiful local woman, a staff member in Murakawa's office, Bai Li, he soon gets used to the place of his new employment and becomes a hard-working and frugal man, like the local Manchukuo people. Murakawa is attracted to Bai Li and ignores his cousin Yae's romantic interest in him. The triangular relationship narratively is resolved by aborting the marriage plot: both Bai Li and Yae turn down Murakawa romantically, resisting the cliché of colonial romance. At the end, Bai Li leaves for Beijing and Yae leaves for Tokyo for career development. Their aspirations for independence inspire Murakawa to stay at Fengtian and work for the development of the Manchukuo nation.

Interethnic romance and reversed gender roles constitute the two major narratives threads of *Winter Jasmine*, and Bai Li's role as a Manchukuo working woman is essential to both. As we recall, the film begins with Bai Li playing hockey on the skating rink in the factory. Situating the female protagonist simultaneously in work and recreational locations, *Winter Jasmine* forcefully constructs the image of a working woman with mobility; she has access to different social spheres. In contrast, during 1930s-1940s while Man'ei films promoted the image of working women in Manchukuo, an audience in Japan could see a film about a young woman who worked as a telephone operator at a pharmaceutical company in Osaka who was forced into becoming her boss's mistress. This film, Kenji Mizoguchi's *Osaka Elegy* (1936), visualizes a stereotypical trope of modern Japanese women in the capitalist economy.

In the working place, the working woman, Ayako, is sexually objectified and constantly harassed by her boss and other male superiors. For example, the first shot of Ayako at the workplace frames her in the operator's room. Sealed by glasses, Ayako in a kimono looks like a beautiful flower trapped in a cage (see fig.1). The potted flowers on her desk fit with her identity as decoration in the male-dominant space. A subsequent close-up of Ayako focuses on her beautiful



The caged working woman. *Osaka Elegy* (Mizoguchi, 1936).



Ayako's profile. *Osaka Elegy*.



Angle up on chimney of the Manchukuo factor in the air. *Winter Jasmine* (Sasaki, 1942)



Tilt down to the factory's skating rink with men and women workers engaged in sport. *Winter Jasmine*.



Bai Li's sportswoman's body. *Winter Jasmine*.

profile and also shows all the male co-workers behind the glass window as a background. While highlighting Ayako's sexuality on the one hand, the composition of this shot also marginalizes Ayako by placing her profile at the far left of the frame.

In contrast to this depiction of the oppressed Ayako, the opening sequence of *Winter Jasmine* foregrounds Bai Li's autonomy and competence in the skating rink. In this her first appearance, Bai Li's skillful skating is centered in the frame. A long shot portrays Bai Li as the best hockey player among all the young men and young women. In the next shot of a conversation between Bai Li and a male colleague, we hear about her ability. Unlike Ayako who is filmed in a gender-segregated space, Bai Li sits side by side with a male colleague. The image thus represents gender equality in Manchukuo. Comparing Mizoguchi's Ayako and Sasaki's Bai Li, we can see clearly the different rendition of working women in Japanese and Manchukuo cinema. While the working woman in a Japanese company is still subject to male supremacy and is judged by her sexuality, Manchukuo's working women seem to have independence and respect.

In sports, movement is not related to work demands; rather, it enhances and preserves the body. What is revolutionary about *Winter Jasmine* is that Bai Li and Yae's sportswomen's bodies represent their liberty and ability to control over their own bodies; these are crucial elements of personal sovereignty. The film portrays a woman's body not in terms of sellable sexuality but in its capacity and will for work and leisure. Bai Li and Yae's engagement in hockey is especially striking if compared with the "youth sports film" in 1930s Japan, which uses the *male* body to "disseminate a performance of the physical body as the national body that corresponds to the state's attempts to instruct people in the ways of citizenship" (Wada-Marciano 2008, 65). Whereas Japanese films of the time showed that men could move and travel, *Winter Jasmine* represents Bai Li and Yae as being good at hockey. Furthermore, the male protagonist, Murakawa, has a heavy and unathletic body and he cannot play the game. With their agility and strength, Bai Li and Yae's sportswomen's bodies and mobility begin to stand for Manchukuo's modernity.

In another contrast with Japanese film, in addition to the "youth sports film," the Japanese director, Kurosawa Akira's *The Most Beautiful* demonstrates how imperialism exploited women's agility and strength. Made in 1944, *The Most Beautiful* championed a wartime spirit when Japan was in a crucial moment during the Pacific War. Women's body and physical strength were then mobilized for devotion to mass production in order to support the empire. In contrast to Bai Li's body, empowered with autonomy and mobility, the female workers' bodies in *The Most Beautiful* are subordinated to patriarchal power. Despite the woman protagonist, at Kurosawa's film's beginning, the female factory workers are ignored and marginalized. Previous scholarship regarded *The Most Beautiful* as a "humanistic" propaganda film or even documentary-like depiction of women (Richie 1996, 26; Yoshimoto 2000, 88). However, the beginning sequence showcases the very inhuman aspect of wartime mass production. The first two empty shots show the name of the factory and an audio speaker on a factory building. Human activity only appears in the third shot, yet here we see male factory administrators who are preparing to give a speech to all the workers. In the fourth shot, the male factory director in medium close-up appeals to workers to strive harder to meet the war needs. In this sequence, the ordinary man looks heroic in Hollywood style lighting. A viewer might almost mistake him as the protagonist of this film, yet the real protagonists, women workers, will not appear till later. The fifth to the eighth shots depict the assembled factory workers, the audience for this mobilization speech, all male, all emotionless and motionless. In these long shots, the army of workers looks like cluster of highly confirmative anonymous dots. Just like the optical products they manufacture that serve the



The Chinese Bai Li teaches the Japanese Murakawa skating. *Winter Jasmine*.



The all-male leadership in Japanese film. *The Most Beautiful* (Kurosawa, 1944).



Three point lighting makes the male director look like the protagonist in *The Most Beautiful*.

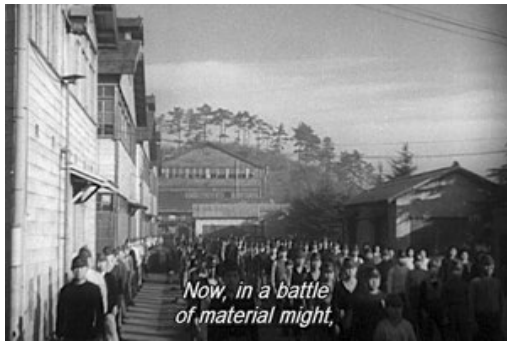
war machine, the anonymous workers are also merely parts of the imperial project. However, even in this sequence that shows the nameless human parts of the war machine, one still cannot see any woman. Only in the ninth shot does a very indistinct appearance of a female worker emerge at the margin of the frame.

The cinematography of the beginning sequence thus sets a tone for *The Most Beautiful*. The film immediately implies that female workers will only win recognition when they submit their personal interests, emotions, families, and healthy, active bodies to the war. Indeed, for most of the film we see women at work, playing music, or doing sports; they seem to have a lot of mobility. However, women's activities all take place in the factory compound, and the recreation does not aim to build their fitness but rather to enhance productivity. Only when one woman has thoroughly subordinated her personal interest to the empire, towards the end of the film, does the image of a female worker become heroic.

If we contrast the opening sequence of *The Most Beautiful* to that of *Winter Jasmine*, we can see that the juxtaposition of productive space with recreational space in the opening shot of the Manchukuo film has another vision of women's role in the new nation's modernization. With cheerful non-diegetic music playing over it, a long shot of a smoking chimney in the sky tilts down to a skating rink below. Labor is intertwined with leisure. It's an image unlike the well-known, usual one of factory work, for example, in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), where workers are overwhelmed by machines. In the Manchukuo film, it is assumed that as factory workers produce materials for infrastructural building, sports produce strong citizens. In addition, hockey and skating are shown as *healthy* entertainment, in contrast to dance and gambling, the more decadent popular pastimes. Here it seems that people build strong bodies and minds for a strong nation.

As the plot now focuses on Bai Li and Murakawa in the city, *Winter Jasmine's* cinematography contextualizes Bai Li within the public sphere and thus foregrounds the working woman's relation to different social settings. She moves freely between the office, street, domestic spaces, and skating rink, where her mobility and confidence make her feel comfortable everywhere. The film depicts her skating four times. Every time, the tracking shot of her movement highlights her sportswoman's body. In a medium long shot, Bai Li holds Murakawa's hand and teaches him how to stand straight on skates. She looks at ease on the ice, while Murakawa can hardly keep his balance. Bai Li is not only Murakawa's skating teacher but also his life coach for his new life in Manchukuo. She tells Murakawa how to save money in the office, and also encourages him to familiarize himself with the city while they eat in a restaurant. In each scenario, a medium long shot places Bai Li at the center of the frame with Murakawa at the margin. When Bai Li is talking in confidence, Murakawa either clasps his face between his hands or listens carefully like a student. When Bai Li takes the role as a pedagogue, the power dynamics between the male colonizer and the female colonized are reversed.

Bai Li takes Murakawa for a tour of Fengtian, familiarizing Murakawa with both the new shopping district and the traditional Chinese residential area, at once showing her mastery over city geography and Murakawa's dependency on her. It is in this sequence that *Winter Jasmine* firmly flips the role of who is the *de facto*



Army of workers. *The Most Beautiful*.



No females appear in the army of workers. *The Most Beautiful*.



The army of workers in shadow. *The Most Beautiful*.

protagonist. By now, Murakawa's protagonist status, like the superiority he gets from his birth status as a Japanese man from the imperial center, is thrown into doubt. Usually the composition centers Bai Li, putting Murakawa on the margin in profile. The audience is encouraged to side with Bai Li's point of view. It is not surprising that Bai Li's command of the city and her competence in maneuvering within the local culture make her a natural teacher guiding Murakawa along. Such a gender reversal is simultaneously a revision of colonial relationships, with the colonizer the master from the metropole and the local inevitably under his tutelage.

Inspired by Bai Li, Yae leaves Murakawa and rejects the idea of marriage. This not only challenges a traditional romantic film plot, but it also has as its basis the ease with which the women characters engage with urban life. The harmonious coupling between the working women and the new space of a modern city and industry is especially remarkable for *Winter Jasmine*. Almost always in East Asian films of the 1930s and 1940s, the modern city is a place of consumption, crime, and sensation (Singer 1995, 72). Only in *Winter Jasmine* do we see a female protagonist with authority taking advantage of the hybridity of Manchukuo's city culture. It is in seeing the compatibility between the women characters' sovereignty and the modern city that the audience might well begin to imagine Manchukuo as a progressive modern nation.

Winter Jasmine's extraordinary representation of women's independence and mobility is also shared by Manchukuo's magazine culture. For example, *Kylin*, the most popular Chinese-language magazine in Manchukuo, often published talks between female film stars and male scholars devoted to the subject of reading, work, and female independence. For example, in the "Conversation between Miss Yao Lu and Mr. S," the film star Yao Lu was showcased as an intelligent and hard-working professional woman, who loved reading Ivan Turgenev and Lu Xun rather than shopping and dancing (Zhang 1941, page unknown). The article singles out the film actress as a "working woman," connecting the image on the screen to the spectators'/readers' ordinary life and facilitating identification between women viewers and the film actress and her roles. In "Interview with Women on the Frontline of Culture in the Capital City," readers are shown a host of professional women typical of big cities in the 1940s. These included a female doctor, a radio hostess, a theatre actress, a female journalist, a film star, an office staff person, a schoolteacher, and a typist. Each working woman told how well she liked the career opportunity provided by new Manchukuo state. Although their pay varied, the working women all emphasized their economical independence and the satisfaction they derived from their contribution to family and society (Zhang 1941, page unknown).

Curiously, the working women portrayed in *Kylin* seem exclusively Manchurian or Chinese. In contrast, Japanese women in Manchukuo's mass media continued to conform to the patriarchal tradition. An article in *Kylin* titled as "Japanese Women with Oriental Beauty" claimed that "Manchukuo's cuisine, Japanese women, and Western housing are regarded as the best enjoyment in the world." This article not only objectifies Japanese women, but also suggests that obedience and humility make Japanese women the best in the world. Even working women in Japan, the article says, are supposed to obey their husbands, giving up their careers in the productive sphere after they get married (Yongjiang 1942, page unknown).



Eventually, an almost indiscernible image of female worker in the far left of the fourth row appears in the last shot of this sequence. *The Most Beautiful*.



Bai Li as Murakawa's life coach. *Winter Jasmine*.



Murakawa looks like a student. *Winter Jasmine*.

The expected conformity of Japanese women to patriarchal expectations in magazines could explain in part *Winter Jasmine's* portrayal of gender difference between Manchurian and Japanese women. Such an intra-gender and interracial relation is seen through the director's representation of domestic spaces. Although a hockey player, the Japanese character Yae is usually confined to the domestic domain. The film has scenes in Yae or Bai Li's living rooms, and both abodes showcase different cultural traditions. A traditional Japanese-style living room is the center of Yae's home, reminiscent of Ozu's cinematic representations of Japanese family life.[9] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The film director's apprenticeship to Ozu is visible here. A long shot shows the Japanese architectural divider, a *fusuma*, separating the Japanese-style room from a more modern Western-style room, while the *fusuma* also frames the women in the traditional room. The mother in kimono sits in front of a *chabudai* (Japanese style short table) all the time, wrapping gifts or doing ikebana. Yae, though in Western attire, is always seen here with her mother, talking about cooking or marriage. Yae's father Kawashima never steps into the traditional living room throughout the film. Apparently, the domestic space of a Japanese family is constructed here as "feminine," which is also supposed to stand for Japanese culture and tradition. Yae's family and her limited mobility in the domestic space exemplify the gendered division of labor which has had a long life in liberalism, where "the family or personal life is natural to woman and in some formulations divinely ordained; it is a domain governed by needs and affective ties" (W. Brown 1995, 155).

Contrary to this more traditional and feminine rendition of a Japanese home in Manchukuo, the Manchurian family in *Winter Jasmine* does not seem to display a gendered division of labor. The Chinese woman, Bai Li, has freedom to move between the spaces of the hybrid culture and other spaces in her home. In the scene of Yae's father's visit to Bai Li's father, the Chinese living room is photographed in a diagonal perspective, thus highlighting the spaciousness and loftiness of the Chinese house. The living room is a single large space decorated with multicultural artifacts. The doors have a "double-happiness" pattern emblem, and that along with the color-painting beam exhibit features of Manchurian local culture. In the foreground of the image is a set of synthesized European dining table and chairs. In the background, a Japanese doll stands by a Chinese vase. In a home of a local Manchurian family, instead of a space that claims the authenticity of local culture and tradition, competing signs of various cultures are integrated within it, suggesting modernity of many cultural influences. While Japanese domestic space is exclusively occupied by Japanese women, Bai's living room is for both men and women, Japanese and Manchurian.



The Japanese living room of Bai Li's friend Yae. It is a space for women only.

The Chinese living room in Bai's family is for both men and women.

In this scene, Bai Li's father and Yae's father, Hawashima, engage in a competition of *go*, resonating with the competition between Bai Li and Yae for a lover. In both competitions, the Manchurian wins over the Japanese. The film plot offers viewers a moment to imagine Manchukuo's superiority and it reflects a utopian dream of the colonial and imperial intellectuals in Manchukuo. Although the Japanese government attempted to make Manchukuo a colony of the Empire, the actual nation builders — such as its intellectuals, engineers, politicians and military officials — participated in the construction of the Manchukuo-state for different purposes. They did not necessarily support the Kwantung Army's ambition of maintaining its dominance in the colonial state, nor the head of Manchukuo, Puyi's wish to turn Manchukuo into his private kingdom.

In *Winter Jasmine*, Bai and Kawashima represent the Japanese scholars and China experts who flocked to Manchuria in a period of rapid colonial expansion as early as 1910s. For them, the establishment of the state of Manchukuo promised the birth of a new kind of nation that would accommodate Japanese economic imperialism and Chinese nationalism (Young 1999, 243). In more than two decades of its development, this dream seemed to have been partially realized in terms of economic and cultural autonomy. The intrinsic contradiction of Japanese colonial policy in Manchukuo was the conflict between consolidating imperial domination and promoting Manchukuo as a nation-state, and this contradiction unexpectedly opened a space for multiethnic culture and gender equality. Manchukuo's mass media promoted the image of working women — a medical doctor, schoolteacher, professional writer or office staff — much like Bai Li on the screen, or the writer Mei Niang in reality. This image of working women personifies Manchukuo's sovereignty. The contrast between Bai Li and Murakawa, and Bai Li's father's defeat of Kawashima in the *go* game appear to illuminate cinematically Manchukuo's autonomy in the game of modernization.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Women go to the city



The Only Son (Ozu, 1936).



All's Well that Ends Well (Wang, 1942).



The lamp in the cramped space. *The Only Son*.

Winter Jasmine's treatment of women who do not succumb to marriage and family seems a radical contrast to another Manchukuo film *All's Well that Ends Well*, clearly a remake of Ozu's *The Only Son*. This was Ozu's first film with the Shochiku Ofuna Studio in 1936, where the director of *All's Well that Ends Well*, Wang Xinzhai, later had his training (Yamaguchi 1995, 147). "Ofuna flavor," the women-oriented melodrama, effectively shapes *All's Well that Ends Well*.^[10] [\[open endotes in new window\]](#) Both Ozu's and Wang's films narrate the passage from the country to the city as experienced by a mother or a grandmother. Ozu's cinematic language is also discernable in Wang's film narrative. For example, in the scene of the mother's arrival of Xinjing, Wang uses Ozu's visual strategy, exhibiting the magnificent capital city with the shots of the cityscape taken from a taxi. Even Wang's composition of the shot within the taxi is identical to *The Only Son*.

In *The Only Son* Ozu tells the story of an old mother's visit to her son in Tokyo after her life-long sacrifice for his education. In the midst of the city's abundance and magnificence, the old working-class mother from provincial Japan and her struggling son in the metropolis remain outcasts of Japan's modernity. Wang's *All's Well that Ends Well* also deals with personal striving within a national framework, although Wang tells a story of satisfaction and Ozu one of dissatisfaction. Not cast out of modernity, the peasant mother in Wang's story is embraced by modern culture, especially when she visits the Great East Asian Construction Expo in Xinjing (hereafter, the EXPO). A comparative reading of Ozu's *The Only Son* and Wang Xinzhai's *All's Well that Ends Well* reveals how the films' depictions of women's roles and life style here indicate as well a contrast of different modernities and different gender roles, especially when seen in a transnational context.

The Only Son constructs a mother figure in metropolitan Tokyo; the context is Japan's rapid imperial expansion. The hard working silk-mill worker, the widowed mother, would sell her land and house in order to support her only son's education in Tokyo. Though a factory worker her whole life, the mother is a typical woman confined to the familial and reproductive domain, investing her hope in her son's personal glory. Ozu's sophisticated opening and closing mise-en-scène in *The Only Son* bookend women's confinement in wartime Japan. In the beginning pillow-shot, the opened *shoji* screen frames a hanging lamp, creating a cramped and static feeling for the family abode, where the mother will later appear. Following are shots with a street view, the female workers in the factory, the village, and the return to the home where the mother is grinding flour. The organization of this sequence moves from "stillness to movement and back to stillness" (Burch 1979, 178). All the stillness is registered within domestic space, while in public space, on the street and in the factory, movement happens. In the factory, the mother is merely an anonymous figure among the laborers. Only when she appears again at the end of this sequence in the kitchen is her identity discernable. The contrast between stillness and mobility, anonymity and visibility, reveals a domestic gender inequality enforced by the gendered divisions of labor. Although the mother has a job similar to men's work, she cannot really claim her subjective sovereignty, her capacity to desire or choose, because familial obligation confines her to the household. Ozu's representation of the mother



The empty space and the mother's emptiness.
The Only Son.

protagonist does not emphasize her personal achievement at her job or in society, but instead the film's script focuses on her encumbrances and feminine duty of making her son a great man in the future.

In the film's finale, the mother returns to her workplace, coming back from Tokyo with disappointment. A long shot displays her wailing in the empty courtyard. The openness of this image is a perfect contrast to the cramped feeling of the film's opening. While the very first shot of the film seems to trace domestic space as restricted, the emptiness at the end of the film is just as terrifying as her obligations. Because the old woman has neither property nor family, she is indentured to the factory. The scene's emptiness indicates her poverty and loneliness as a female subject of the Empire of Japan.

Made in 1936, when Japan's on-going war with China was raging, Ozu does not seem to refer at all to the warfare. However, one intertitle indicates that the mother's trip to Tokyo occurs in 1936. On February 26th of that year, an attempted military coup prompted the Japanese government to consolidate its power, pursuing a full-scale military campaign (Cazdyn 2002, 187). This revelation of the specific year puts the woman protagonist in the center of historical time when warped capitalist industrialization has pushed Japan further in its imperial colonization and expansion. With this historical awareness, Ozu's gives viewers a greater understanding of the nameless woman in a film about her "only son." The empire's colonial expansion commanded a woman to be "good wife wise mother" to support her men in the war. Feudal patriarchal oppression now is replaced by imperial capitalism, the expansion of which aggravates women's confinement in the domestic sphere.



The peasant mother rides a car in the city. *All's Well that Ends Well.*

In a stylistic contrast, Ozu's subtle critique of imperialism and gender oppression are turned into an utopian comedy in Manchukuo's *All's Well that Ends Well*. This was probably due to Manchukuo's severe film censorship.[11] Wang's most significant deviation from Ozu in *All's Well that Ends Well* is his inversion of prevalent gender roles, so that Ozu's more realistic presentation gives way to Wang's more idealistic film representation. To a certain extent, *All's Well that Ends Well* resembles Chaplin's "Comedy of Transformation," emphasizing the immigrant's conflicting reactions to his own transformation by the host culture (Hug 2001, 215). In the process of Old Lady Wu's learning urban culture and exploring unfamiliar regions, the audience explores as well the migrants' assimilation into and resistance to the city. The old peasant mother is not depicted as a stereotypical mother or grandmother encumbered by life's necessities such as cooking, laundry, shopping or child rearing. Old Lady Wu takes the train by herself to come to the capital city, and there she feels at ease with all its modern facilities.

Half of the film traces her visit to the EXPO, walking around in the park, experiencing the excitement of speed in the amusement park, and visiting the exhibition pavilions. She's on the move in the city, and this mobility and autonomy all come from her participation in the EXPO.[12] The Xinjing EXPO in 1942 in the film temporarily liberates the old mother from a familial domain. Her identity as a farmer and a mother is no longer tied to reproduction or a fixed location in pre-designated space.[13] In *All's Well that Ends Well*, Old Lady Wu's passage to the city and her passage to EXPO enable the peasant mother to move beyond her agricultural past and domestic conditioning, now getting access to city life, a bourgeois future, and nation construction. In this sense, this film can be considered as a "public fantasy." Such a fantasy, according to Teresa de Lauretis,

"perform[s] at the societal level and in the public sphere, a function similar to that of the private fantasies, daydreams and reveries by



The peasant mother in the amusement park at the EXPO. *All's Well that Ends Well*.

which individual subjects imagine or give images to their erotic, ambitious or destructive aspirations” (Lauretis 1999, 304).

The EXPO, the aspirational narrative of constructing a stronger nation, incorporates the old woman, as an unconventional figure of modernity, into the production of the nation. The film thus endows her with liberty to access different social spheres. The film’s progressive imagination about women’s potential autonomy and mobility were unexpectedly enabled by the crystallization of Japanese imperialism, the EXPO. In this sense, *All’s Well that Ends Well* defines Manchukuo’s distinctive “colonial modernity.”

The EXPO also came at the tenth anniversary of Manchukuo’s establishment. The national “birthday” and EXPO became a perfect venue for propaganda, through which the colonial government strove to consolidate Manchukuo’s legitimacy. As the only film production company in Manchukuo, Man’ei played an essential role in this campaign. With the representation of the grandiose Xinjing and the splendid EXPO, *All’s Well that Ends Well* portrayed Manchukuo as a cosmopolitan center in the Japanese imperial project that aimed to mobilize all the region’s citizens to construct Greater East Asia. Though relatively unknown in the United States, this film has attracted Japanese and Chinese film scholars’ attention in recent years. Thus, Furuichi and Ding, two film historians in China, have used formal analysis to indicate the film’s propaganda imperative, and Ding in particular points out its extraordinary portrayal of rural space. Unlike the Shanghai leftist films that eulogized country life in contrast to the decadent capitalist culture in the city, *All’s Well that Ends Well* shows both the city and the country in a positive light (Furuichi 2010, 95-97; Ding 2008, 146-163).

The first half of the film presents the movement from the country to the city, and then the city is a space where the old lady experiences modernity and modernity’s troubles. Old Lady Wu’s uses of different kinds of modern transportation, and her encounters with all the magnificent urban architecture highlight Manchukuo’s achievements in industrialization and modernization. Meanwhile, the peasant lady also comes across her son-in-law’s suspected affair and her second son’s unemployment. While storylines in the first half of the film realistically present the city and its troubles, the second half of the film provides with a utopian resolution.

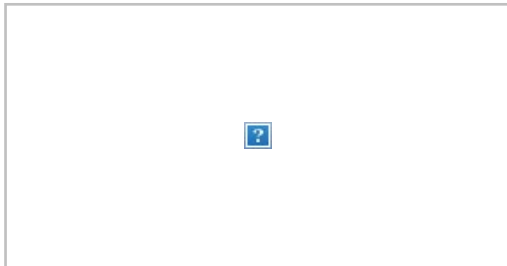
The EXPO becomes a symbolic and ritualistic resolution to the conflicts people face in ordinary life. In going to the EXPO, Old Lady Wu joins her grandson in the amusement park, appreciating Western music in a concert hall. The EXPO seems to prepare the peasant lady for modern life. Her country wisdom is not despised in the city; rather, her advice to her daughter and her understanding she shows her son bring about harmony in the extended family. The EXPO inspires everyone to construct Great East Asia, including the old mother. Thus, even the country woman becomes part of nation building as the film touts the importance of agricultural labor in the nation-building process. In the film’s nationalistic idealization, Manchukuo’s modernity, epitomized by the EXPO, is theoretically able to resolve the gender contradiction that Wendy Brown does not think capitalistic liberalism shall be able to resolve.[14]

Because of the EXPO’s unique role in exhibiting power in the industrial and capitalist world, it is also an essential event during Manchukuo’s 10th anniversary. For many imperialist countries, hosting an EXPO is a demonstration of their power (Bean 1987, 554). For most of the East Asian countries that painstakingly battle against imperialism and colonialism, participation in an EXPO is a step toward modernization and national salvation. Historians and anthropologists have elaborated the intimate relationship between world fairs, mass media and tourism, especially their cumulative impact on economy and



The magnificent architecture along the street of Xinjing. *All’s Well that Ends Well*.

[It would be useful to have more shots of her at the EXPO]



politics. International expositions and world fairs are venues to flaunt national powers in the areas of construction, industrialization, and scientific technology. They have presented new entertainment media and opportunities for “vicarious travel” in imagining other lands. They aim at

“boost[ing] the economic development of the cities and regions in which they were held as well as to advance the material growth of the country at large” (Ibid., 554).

The world’s fairs in the United States have been an integral part of nationalism, imperialism, and modernist economic and political forces that have dominated U.S society since 1876 (J. Brown 2002, 430). The EXPO in 1942 is Manchukuo’s world debut, which is also a redux of Japan’s 26th centennial celebration. That is, in 1940, before Japan officially encountered the United States in the war, Japanese imperialism reached its apex in the empire’s 2600th anniversary. The imperial government availed itself of mass media, the railway system and consumer culture to reinforce both collective memory and national identity. Imperial tourism and national fairs not only stimulate domestic economy but also facilitate a sense of national pride. Here the 26th centennial mobilized men and women in Japan to devote themselves to the imperial war. In spite of the scarcity caused by the ongoing Sino-Japanese War, Japan’s 26th centennial celebrations created an image of abundance and luxury for its imperial subjects, manifesting its increasing military and economic power (Ruoff 2010, 2-6). With Xijing EXPO, Japan seized the opportunity of Manchukuo’s 10th anniversary to promote its imperial expansion through the glorification of Manchukuo’s modern achievements. It was also many people’s, especially women’s, first time to experience the time and place they were in, as well as the new technology and industrialization that Manchukuo had established. A visit to the EXPO allowed women who rarely ventured beyond the domestic sphere to know that they were also connected to the nation’s modernity and to the world.

Manchukuo’s distinctive colonial modernity is displayed in *All’s Well That Ends Well* in the level of narrative. For the peasant lady, the EXPO is a ritual through which she gets connected to modernity, and it is also the venue where the previous problematic family gets its reunion. One can say personal sovereignty and family integrity are at the core of the film and both are subject to the sway of Japanese imperialism.

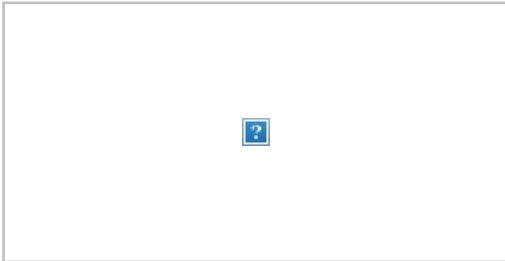
At this point, it is useful to step back and think historically about what the introduction to modernity might mean to a person’s subjective grasp of both the world and themselves. For example, Marshall Berman describes modernity as “a mode of vital experience”:

“Experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience ‘modernity.’ To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology; in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air.’” (Berman 1982, 15)

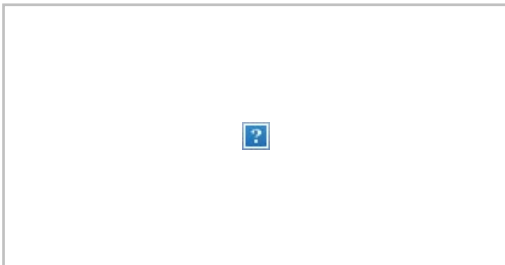


It is in this vein that *All's Well that Ends Well* depicts the peasant woman's first experience of modernity. At the EXPO, she is situated in an environment of excitement, speed and peril, and eventually she goes through her own transformation. As an old mother from the "past", who represents the feudal agricultural tradition, she is fully embraced by the "future," the new nation, the modern city and the next generation. The EXPO works as the liminal phase of a ritual, through which a new social identification or new social order is embodied. Warren Susman, for example, is fascinated by world fairs' ritual function, and proposes its study in light of Victor Turner's classic concept of liminality. Susman suggests that the 20th century world fairs share several similarities with the medieval pilgrimage. "The modern fair represents [the] liminal stage that Turner assigns to pilgrimage" that prepares the social body with a new understanding of collective identity and a new conception of social order (Susman 1983, 6). During the "liminal phase" of rites of passage, according to Turner,

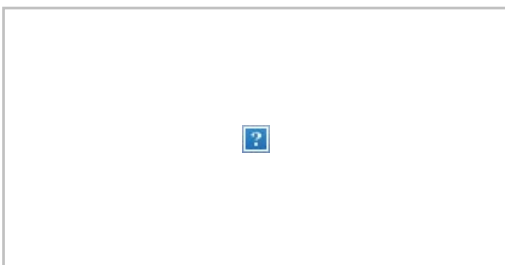
"the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated" (Turner 1969, 359).



If the trip to Xinjing's EXPO is a pilgrimage to industrial modernity, Old Lady Wu and her family's participation in the EXPO works as the "liminal phase" of a rite of passage, which connects Old Lady Wu (an attribute of Manchukuo's past) to the metropolitan city and culture (attributes of Manchukuo's future).



Turner notes that the liminal condition is "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and the ceremonial." Liminality is usually chaotic, linked to darkness or wilderness (Turner 1969, 359). The EXPO represented in the film is both wild and chaotic. The sensational stimulus manufactured by the commercial amusement makes everything disordered. In the amusement park sequence, dynamic camera movements exhibit a panorama of the EXPO, in an overwhelming effect. A crane shot in low angle pans from right to left, depicting and highlighting an imposing battleship under the blue sky. Continuing panning left, the shot shows the stirring national flags, and then the camera angle lows a little bit in order to display a crowd of people in the foreground against the monumental architecture at the background. Then, the camera angle lowers further and zooms in, showing the rotating ships and joyful children. The long take delineates euphoria. The sophisticated mise-en-scène stresses the fast speed, the large scale and the abundance of modern city life, stressing the texture of experience, bringing about visceral tensions.



As the crowd encounters this manufactured sensationalism, familial order is jeopardized and people get lost. As soon as Old Lady Wu and her grandson arrive the EXPO, the boy is captivated by the amusement park, refusing to obey his grandma any more. The grandma is forced to follow the boy, riding the rotating planes and ships and even visiting the horror chamber. In fact, a basic fascination with the horrific, the grotesque and the extreme is a typical expression of urban modernity (Singer 1995, 87). In this film, the horror chamber scene not only portrays urban life's "nervous stimulation" and "bodily peril" (Singer 1995, 77), it but also is "linkened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness," which "liminality" is always associated with. According to Turner, as liminal beings, people at this stage have no status, no positions in a kinship system; they are waiting to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life (Turner 1969, 359). Thus, going through the horror chamber, the grandson goes astray, Old Lady Wu loses her way, her son-in-law is separated from his wife, and the wife gets angry when she sees her husband talking to a younger woman. People lose directions, identities, a sense of security,



and their family in the exciting, tempting, terrifying and speeding environment created by the modern ritual.

Transnational participation represents another aspect of EXPO's liminality and it also offers the resolution and "reaggregation" concluding the ritual. In the park, the Osaka Pavilion and the Tokyo Pavilion are next to the Nanking Pavilion, which temporarily eliminates the hierarchy between the metropolitan state and the colony. The Forest Pavilion is also placed alongside the exhibition of industrial development, reducing the gap between agriculture and urbanity. The Japanese soldiers, the Russian waitress, and ordinary Manchukuo citizens mingle with each other. As Turner puts it, being in a liminal state also means

"being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition. ... Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized" (Turner 1969, 359-360).



An imagined comradeship and egalitarianism, with transnational, multiethnic harmony anticipates a new social order — which in the case of Manchukuo is "The Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere." Thus, everything gets "reincorporated" when the ritual of the EXPO is consummated at the end of the film. The family is reunited at the dinner table headed by the grandmother. The country lady magically gets used to urban culture, endorsing free love, forgiving the lying child and even understanding a pre-marital sexual relationship. The family gets renewed in the new social order when she calls for her children to build the Greater East Asia with her. Thus, the ritual of the EXPO not only helps those from an agricultural past cope with industrial modernity, refreshing the traditional family in the modern society, but also enabling the peasant woman obtain a new identity in the productive space. Old Lady Wu's temporary liberation from domestic life and her mobility in the public domain help viewers envision gender equality in the new nation, Manchukuo.



This definition of gender and modernity is so progressive that seems to anticipate the feminist debate about gender equality in the late 20th century. Nevertheless, any radical imagination of gender equality and modernity in *All's Well that Ends Well* is subject to Manchukuo's coloniality. The film foregrounds Greater East Asia rather than Manchukuo through the EXPO. In Old Lady Wu's visit to the EXPO, many shots capture the imperial soldiers in informal dress, revealing Japanese military's presence inside Manchukuo. A pan across the Japanese *kanji*, "Demolishing the Brits and the Yankees," is followed by the third son's participation in a game while waiting for his mother. Only near the end of the film when everybody gathers at the concert hall is the symbol of Manchukuo, a national flag, is briefly shown as a backdrop.

All these haunting images of Japan reveal the contradiction between liberty and coloniality at the core of Manchukuo's colonial modernity. As Old Lady Wu ironically says at the beginning of the film, "Changchun has become such a great city. This seems like a lie." She seems to announce that much of what you can see in Manchukuo is a fantastic story, a lie. If so, how dare Man'ei make such an apparent criticism of Japanese imperialism? How could the film censors in Manchukuo possibly ignore it? The trick lies in the translation. In Japanese, "jiuxiang ge huanghua side/It is just like a lie" is read as "Yume mitaida ne/ like a dream". Contrary to its phrasing in English and Chinese, this fixed expression in Japanese is an absolute compliment that describes something as truly wonderful. Thus, the hidden meaning produced in spoken Chinese and Japanese translation tells a different story to the film's multilingual audience. For the Japanese censors and the Japanese audience, this line of dialogue speaks of the glorification of Japanese imperialism, while for the Chinese-speaking audience, this line expresses the fact that Manchukuo sovereignty is no more than a dream in its

actual subordination to Japan.

* * * * *

While Ozu's realistic approach invites his audience to question relations between imperial expansion, gender inequality, and the urban-rural divide in Japanese society, Wang's direction of *All's Well that Ends Well* serves even more compelling interests. Man'ei always faced conflicting allegiances — to the imperial Japanese government, the colonial government of Manchukuo, and the occupying Japanese military, as well as ever-intensifying film censorship in Manchukuo. Balancing these factors determined the director's ambiguous attitude to Japanese imperialism and his subtle representation of Manchukuo's sovereignty. The old mother not only has pride in her children but also finds passion in building a new nation. Imaginatively, such a cinematic rewriting of women's potential mobility in both the reproductive sphere of rearing children and the productive sphere of nation building unintentionally undermines the gendered divisions of labor premised by bourgeois liberalism. Although the old mother is a peasant, she gains a mobility similar to the working woman, Bai Li, in *Winter Jasmine*, and thus they both personify Manchukuo's cultural sovereignty. Nevertheless, in *All's Well that Ends Well* it is the "Greater East Asia Construction EXPO," a major project of Japanese imperialism that affords the plot an utopian resolution of any problems caused by urbanization and industrialization. In the film, the EXPO symbolically and ritualistically prepares the Manchukuo mother to be a figure of both tradition and modernity; she is scripted as a figure apparently able to negotiate the intricacy of the city while at the same time using her folk wisdom and maternal authority to resolve a series of family problems (Ding 2008, 159). The mother's authority, as well as Manchukuo's autonomy, is ultimately predicated both *by and in spite of* Japanese imperialism in Manchukuo.

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Notes

1. Manshu eiga kyokai, aka Man'ei. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Minami Manshu Tetsudo Kabushiki Kaisha, known as Mantetsu.
3. "The National Policy Companies [were] a characteristic feature of Japan's wartime economic system. They were basically private (only partially government-owned) companies whose purpose was to support Japan's national policy. From the 1930s to 1945, this focused on expanding Japan's influence in Manchuria.... Accordingly, the National Policy Companies were primarily expected to promote industrial control, increase productivity, and facilitate the economic and political development of the occupied territories" (Otto 2002, 127).
4. Data comes from Furuichi Masako (Furuichi 2011).
5. Sang argues that the "failed modern girl" is usually a lower-class urban young woman who is seduced by the alluring images of the bourgeois Modern Girl but her attempt to ascend to middle-class status is always in vain.
6. The translation from Chinese is mine.
7. Funded by the Manchukuo government and Southern Manchurian Railway Corporation (aka. Mantetsu), the Japanese "East Indian Company" in Manchuria, Man'ei is, however, subject more to Japanese imperial power than to colonial Manchukuo. In addition, the appointment of Amakasu as the second president of Man'ei was the decision from the Ministry of General Management (Somucho) and Kwantung Army, which demonstrated the extent that Japanese imperial power influenced in Man'ei (Kobashi 2015, 136).
8. Translation of reference in text from original Japanese is mine.
9. According to David Bordwell, Sasaki Yasushi started as Ozu's pupil in 1930 in Shochiku (Bordwell 1988, 25). [[return to page 2](#)]
10. "Since the mid-1920s, Shochiku films within the megagenre of gendai-geki have exhibited characteristics as a group that transcend or engross the personal styles of filmmakers. Critics designated this shochiku studio style 'kamata flavor' or 'ofuna flavor.'" "Shochiku became the primary force in shaping the two perennially dominant gendai-geki genres of melodrama and shoshimin-geki. Both genres were excellent vehicles for conveying philosophies about suffering and happiness, tears and laughter, ideals and realities" (Anderson and Richie 1989, 244). [[return to page 3](#)]
11. According to the *Regulations of Film Production* (Eiga ho/Yinghua fa) enacted in 1937, the prime minister of Manchukuo has the authority to determine the content and subject of film production and he has the authority in the selection of film exhibition and distribution (cf. Article 7). The film exhibition and film distribution are subjects to the ministry of Security's censorship (cf. Article 5) (Hu

and Gu 1990, 226).

12. The EXPO in this film was Xinjing EXPO; it was part of The Great East Asian EXPO (Daitoa hakuran kai/Dadongya bolanhui) in 1942 and also was The 10th Anniversary of the Founding of Manchukuo EXPO (Jianguo shinian bolanhui). The other sites of The Great East Asian EXPO included Beijing, Harbin and Nanjing. In Nanjing, it was the Great East Asian Expo of the War.

13. “Civil society or the economy is natural to man; it is the domain where rights are exercised and individuality is expressed” but life necessity and family obligation confine women in the familial, sexual and reproductive domain(s). Inequality of gender roles is perpetuated in these sets of binary spaces. Man have the liberty to move between public and private domains, while woman can only have either or (W. Brown 1995, 155).

14. The formulation of liberty “requires the existence of encumbered beings, the social activity of those without liberty,” argues Wendy Brown, “it is achieved by displacing the embodied, encumbered, and limited nature of existence onto women” (W. Brown 1995, 154-155).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Sangre*:



Diego is a small-time public officer...



... who reconciles his relationship with Blanca.



Just so they can both return to their favorite pastime...



... of watching soaps, and occasionally more.

Dispatch from Sarajevo: notes on the political correctness of differential laughter

by [Emre Caglayan](#)

My experience of the 22nd Sarajevo Film Festival (12-20 August 2016), which I joined as a participant of its Talents program, reminded me of a conversation I had with an academic about his paper on the films of Roy Andersson at a conference the previous summer. Despite my appreciation of Andersson's bleak humor, I confessed to having problems laughing at his then latest film *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014), particularly during the scenes involving two novelty salesmen. Here were two people leading a pathetic life, and laughing at it would be dismissing what is a very real and pressing existential problem, or so I felt in unease. Upon my declaration, we talked about the difference between laughing *at* and laughing *with* fictional characters, which I rarely thought about in the context of viewing films and the unsettling dynamic of collective hesitation on when to laugh in movie theatres.

Thinking about this made me realize how rarely I laughed with genuine enthusiasm at jokes that others commonly received with exuberance when watching movies. Indeed, I often chuckle at things nobody finds amusing, but at other moments I am clueless as to what prompts people to giggle. Perhaps part of this confusion about what to laugh can be attributed to an early onset of a middle-age crisis: Am I supposed to laugh at this? Is this really what characterizes today's sense of humor? Occasionally, it might be easier to concede my lack of knowledge concerning a specific cultural reference that informs the punch line of a joke, though more frequently, my personal tastes and distastes determine its evaluation. Sometimes, however, there is an element of uncertainty involved in laughing: an uncertainty based on whether laughter is the most suitable or proper type of reaction to a joke, which is deliberately rendered obscure and vague in its intent or context.

The distinction between laughing at and laughing with, when combined with the conundrum of hesitation, brings about an interesting set of tensions on how different audiences react to the same film. While laughing to keep oneself from crying may happen in film viewing, thinking of laughter as a pretext for other latent reactions is especially pertinent today. Now is a time when laughter, alongside mockery, is regularly deployed against political figures as a means to resist or critique prevailing political discourses, or it may simply function as a coping mechanism to relieve us from surreal developments in contemporary politics. The audience at the Sarajevo Film Festival was responsive to films in different ways from me, and this discrepancy between my own and others' reactions led me to question some of the ethical implications of humor in some films. This was particularly evident during two screenings: Amat Escalante's *Sangre* (2004) and Mehmet Can Mertoğlu's *Albüm* (2016). Both films are feature-



Diego receives a phone call, but keeps it quiet.



Arranges an apartment for his daughter to settle in...



... only to find her lifeless body on the floor the next day.



Diego's moment of truth: but it's unclear to whom he pleads...

length debuts, raw and audacious outputs of artists wanting to make a strong impression by investigating sensitive issues. It's a risqué strategy that is simultaneously beguiling and provocative, albeit in all engrossing and productive ways.

On many levels, *Sangre* and *Albüm* are very different films, but what attracts me to both is their investment in realism – that old, sketchy concept, upon which much of film theory engaged in decades-long skirmishes via delineating it as a political weapon of choice. I will not summarize the theoretical undercurrent of the conceptual enigma that realism poses here, but as a critical tool, here realism can help unlock and provoke fresh discussions of how these particular films provide commentaries on their respective cultural politics. Both films depict situations ordinarily observable in day-to-day life, but by framing these situations via unusual perspectives and through unconventional film style, the films deliver trenchant criticisms of social attitudes and assumptions. Much of this political critique depends on transgressing ethical boundaries and positioning the subject matter according to an ambivalent politics of humor. On the whole, the films are characterized by a deadpan, farcical and absurd sensibility – but with an ambivalence that ultimately has the potential to induce and sustain a degree of ethical sensitivity on part of its spectators.

On description, *Sangre* sounds less a comedy than an unflinching, psychological investigation of the thin line between fidelity and independence, filtered through quotidian details of a particularly squalid Mexican setting. It concerns the isolated lifestyle of a working class couple in a provincial town who, despite their public-oriented jobs, have built a delicate private life with little interaction with the world outside. Diego, a cross-eyed, chubby doorman at a governmental institution, whose responsibility is restricted to counting the number of people that enter the building, seems accustomed to and content with the daily rituals that he shares with his spouse Blanca. Their favorite pastime is watching television: cuddling together on their scruffy sofa, snacking on junk food, excited at the incessant roll of serial soap operas. Indeed, their emotional investment in fictional television has infiltrated their own code of conduct. This is a couple that live their lives as if in a soap opera. At work, they are seemingly restrained, modest and minding their own business, and yet at home, they are nothing short of two lovebirds. Regularly copulating in different rooms, their passion is as intense, exaggerated and intractable as in any melodramatic soap opera.

This perfect routine is soon disrupted by a phone call, nervously picked up by Diego – it's a lifeline sought by his daughter, presumably from a previous marriage, asking to move in. For Diego, this is all too distressing, and he initially refuses in order to avoid having Blanca's jealousy. But, out of decency, he arranges a temporary hotel room for his daughter to settle in, only to find her lifeless body on the floor the next day. This situation pushes Diego to make profound changes to his daily routine. The scene, which sits at the peak of the film's emotional progression, is depicted through an astonishing choice in direction: Diego sits on a bed, eyes down on the girl's body, takes a deep breath, and utters "help..." with an intonation half-way between an awareness of nobody present and a hope for someone or something reaching out.

In many ways, *Sangre* ticks all the boxes for a minimalist, festival film from Latin America. It has an introverted and laconic leading male lead, long takes that exhibit protracted and banal daily rituals (for instance, a lengthy scene where Blanca takes a long time to prepare breakfast, only to have it burnt by Diego in a matter of seconds – in itself a singular example of cinematic irony), a narrative pacing that is bound to be labeled slow, and a baffling closing sequence leaving Diego's existential conflict largely unresolved. Nonetheless, Escalante's aesthetics is more deserving than run-of-the-mill Latin American miserabilism, and brings

to mind a Bressonian sensibility in direction and staging. It has a notable use of non-professional actors, or more specifically toneless delivery of dialogue, inscrutable facial expressions, robotic body movements. It also has an austere precision of shot compositions, sparse mise-en-scène and a hushed sound design. It was by no surprise that Escalante mentioned Robert Bresson as a prevailing influence in the post-screening Q&A, moderated by *Sight and Sound* editor Nick James. Indeed, *Sangre* builds on several motifs that Bresson was renowned and praised for. Long-remembered are Bresson's static camera positions rarely in movement, tight framings that frequently fragment surrounding space and bodies of actors, a deliberate misuse of editing conventions in regards to ordinary cinematic punctuation (for example, direct cuts for temporal ellipses or fade-to-black for continuous scenes), and, most famously, the deployment of what Bresson called "human models." These were amateur actors cast for their physical traits (Bresson defined those as a "movement from the exterior to the interior") and according to Bresson, important "not [because] what they show [us] but what they hide from [us], and, above all, *what they do not suspect is in them.*"[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



The film is shot in a Bressonian style: here a tabletop viewed from an oblique angle...



...on which Blanca and Diego have sex, though their bodies remain fragmented due to the film's tight framings.

But this Bressonian asceticism did not fare well with the audience at Sarajevo. On the contrary, large groups of audience members collapsed in derisive convulsions and muttered what I interpreted as dissatisfaction or ridicule on viewing scenes that were peculiar, in terms of both the aesthetics and subject matter. Presumably, the source of this collective and uncontrollable laughter partly resided in the film's eccentric style, its ostentatious display of unappealing bodies, and its frank sexuality, all of which were misconstrued as grotesque or perhaps even intolerable. Even more problematic for me were the ways in which certain audience members sniggered at Diego's physical attributes. In particular, the acting style seemed to be greeted with derision and denigration. It was as if the audience laughed at the film because it violated the rules of the game, that viewers disdained the transgression of cinematic conventions as inferior filmmaking – or in layman's terms, they thought it a bad film, and that it was only fair to sneer at the filmmaker's ineptitude and treat the film as a second-rate picture. This unexpected audience response strangely fuelled my own excitement over the film, albeit against a more dominant discernment of mockery insofar as the rest of the auditorium was concerned.

Sometimes laughter was warranted, though it was merely a side effect of the film's overall design. For example, I admit that I submitted to the collective laughter during the scene where Blanca bent over a plastic table and demanded Diego to take her hard, only to have the table break down in a moment of Chaplinesque comedy. The staging in this scene is typically Bressonian and, understandably, the humor arises from the incongruity between the indifferent acting style and the couple's purported passion for each other, a contradiction that transformed sexual

intercourse into a peculiarly mechanical activity. But there is more: the scene not only functions as a comedic interlude, but also illustrates how this relationship, despite its hyper-melodramatic passion, rests on a tenuous foundation and functions as an indication that the relationship is to be threatened further along in the narrative.

Now, the question here is not whether laughter is the appropriate response, but the ways in which different types of laughter are inextricably tied up with notions of value judgments. This is where I think the distinction between laughing at and laughing with figures significantly, as it has the capacity to serve as an indicator of how we evaluate aesthetic merit. More importantly, it helps us to discern a distinctively humanistic quality: the aptitude for empathy. If the flatness of Bressonian “human models” conceals emotions, then it liberates the viewer to explore and ascribe emotions as pertinent here. In this case, what makes us laugh brings out what is in us. In other words, laughing with or laughing at Diego is a matter of choice – a choice that distinguishes empathy from contempt.

Images from *Albüm*:



Opening scene of *Albüm*, a man waits for a cow to arrive...



... to assist both the copulation...



... and the following birth.



The film starts with images of artificial reproduction, asking how such standard operating procedures could animate social behavior.

While *Sangre* is inspired by Robert Bresson, *Albüm* features a wider range of cinematic references. Its bizarre opening sequence, for example, reminds me of Béla Tarr’s mesmerizing *Sátántangó* (1994), in which a godforsaken village is slowly taken over by a group of loose, bellowing cattle wandering through its streets. The village’s fate then is dramatically changed with church bells announcing the return of two deranged outcasts. Equally mystifying in its formal arrangement, *Albüm* uses both the cattle and sound motifs to a different effect. Here, at a slaughterhouse somewhere in Turkey, animals are controlled by humans: a bull is chaperoned by men to copulate, followed by a young calf pulled out of a cow’s womb, while such automation of cattle breeding is strangely accentuated through screeching industrial background noise. The function of this prologue, combined with the ensuing microscopic image depicting the artificial fertilization of an egg, elucidates the film’s main theme. In a world where sex and fertility have become so routine, habitual and culturally standardized, what happens to sterility? How do people cope with infertility and the perceived social pressures of procreation?



The Bahtiyaroğlu family here facing an adoption agency, visibly uncomfortable.



To overcome the social pressures of fertility, the couple decide to document a pregnancy that did not quite exist.



Although these days taking a picture might just stand in for reality, and indeed they know how to stage different aspects of their life...



... to the extent that a midwife and a doctor become instruments to a purported birth at the hospital.



The whole premise of *Albüm* is conveyed through set pieces that evoke the films of Tsai Ming-liang and Roy Andersson: scenes in long shot with overwhelming dark, pale colors, with patches of unexpected brightness, with a technically assured style.

Albüm answers these questions by presenting the quintessential middle-class Turkish couple: husband Cüneyt and wife Bahar, or the Bahtiyaroğlu family, the cipher they use to introduce themselves to adoption agencies. This is a couple wanting to adopt a baby, but in a self-imposed way they fabricate their entire lives in order to preserve their social acceptability. So the film begins with a series of scenes in which the Bahtiyaroğlu family pose for pictures – collected, presumably, for the eponymous title of the film – during a bogus period of pregnancy. Most of the film is in essence a comedy of manners and a satire on the extent to which this couple will do anything but admit the truth insofar as the adoption is concerned. The film suggests that infertility as perceived in Turkish society is something to be embarrassed about, something inherently tied to notions of social status. In order to construct a convincing lie, the couple document their deception with forensic detail and perseverance, going as far as bribing a doctor to recreate a spurious hospital scene following the purported childbirth.

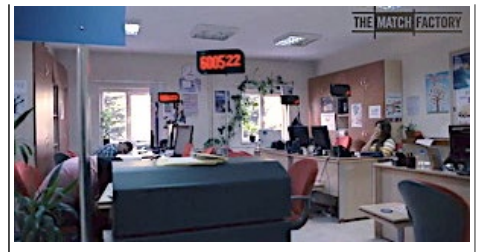
The film is composed of long-take set-pieces overlaid with a deadpan sense of humor, echoing the absurdist visions captured time and again by the likes of Roy Andersson (*Songs From the Second Floor*, 2000) and Tsai Ming-liang (*Vive L'Amour*, 1994), and revamped with an incisive and subtle social criticism characterized by the Romanian New Wave. Indeed, the scrupulous cinematography is the result of a Romanian connection, Marius Panduru, who previously shot *Police, Adjective* (2009). The key to the film's humor is defamiliarizing what is familiar, suggested invariably through meticulous staging, distended temporality, and exaggeration of behaviors that have strangely become customary. In doing so, Mertoğlu mocks the practices associated with an emblematic 21st century phenomenon: documenting one's own private life through various social media applications, so as to construct a social identity ostentatiously conformist in its outlook.



Here a long tracking shot moving in between rooms...



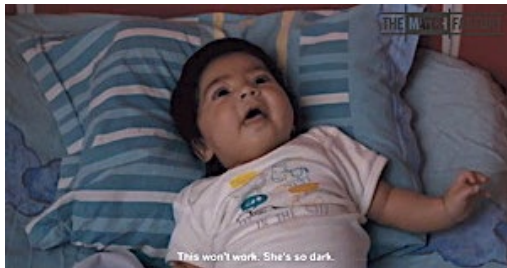
... showing sleepy heads on tables, with never-ending queues...



... arriving at Bahar's desk: apparently it is a typical day at work.

And yet the film's sardonic take on contemporary Turkey is not simply limited to the ways in which digital technology awakens a narcissistic creature inside all of us, but it features a wide array of astute observations on other important issues, ranging from class relations to social behavior, from racial tensions to bureaucracy. For example, Bahar is introduced as a white-collar worker, at a public office so mind-numbingly tedious that employees appear to have fallen asleep on their desks. The extremity of this mundane and humdrum occupation is represented in an impressive long take, where the camera tracks along a corridor, moving in between nearly identical office rooms. The obvious reference here is the infamous traffic jam sequence in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967), which likewise features a tracking shot moving alongside a horizontal line perpendicular to a long queue of cars stuck on a provincial road. While for Godard such traffic jams conveyed the ridiculousness of capitalism, Mertoğlu seems to suggest institutional bureaucracy as some form of postmodern malaise analogous to eternal sleep.

There are, however, moments in which the film's humor moves to a whole different level in penetrating sensitive issues in Turkish cultural discourses. For instance, in their first interview at an adoption agency, the couple is shown a baby with a darker skin tone, which is refused on the basis that it looks Armenian or Kurdish. This is a daring moment in which the film abandons political correctness for another reason, namely demonstrating the disgust and abhorrence regularly found in the treatment of minority populations in Turkey. Is it okay to laugh at this provocation? Isn't there an ethical boundary that has just been crossed? Does chuckling at it not simply reaffirm the extent of that particular attitude, even reinforcing the widely held, state-influenced disrespect for ethnic minorities? Prescriptive answers may not do justice to the complexity of the problem, but surely the type of laughter elicited after such stunts could hint at the extent to which the film subverts principles of political correctness mainly in order to provoke a response from its audience. Personally, I was among the group that broke into a hoot of laughter, quickly followed by criticizing myself, realizing that perhaps I had fallen captive to the film's overt cynicism. Nonetheless this is a good example of how cinema has the capacity to transform social attitudes by using humor as an unlikely instrument, or how it can be political without the radical political aesthetics so entrenched in our writing about film.



Moments in the film where humor can help us question wider social attitudes on race...



... and our everyday use of language.

Another, an even more cynical scene, reflects an aspect of social reality in such a way that it ceases to be amusing altogether. Following their successful adoption of an infant, the Bahtiyaroğlu family moves to a conservative Anatolian town where they make friends with another local couple. We watch as the women hysterically pamper their babies in one room, while in another, men sit and watch football, cursing loudly at the television with what may be the most offensive and degrading use of language towards women in all of film history. Indeed, the scene lays bare a misogyny that afflicts Turkish society and the ways in which it is ingrained in language, through largely untranslatable idioms. While swearing on screen often cause entertainment and delight for film viewers, rarely does withholding one's laughter function as an ethical and political act and a form of

resistance.

In this respect, *Albüm* is not only a comedy film, it is also a film about the nature of comedy: it features question marks about the extent of comedy, and about its ethical and political implications. It elicits laughter, but immediately demands an assessment of that laughter in terms of its political implications. Like *Sangre*, *Albüm* is powerful and beguiling because it mirrors social life and comments on it. Both films beg the question – they demand we talk about problems in daily life that viewers may otherwise miss. In a way, the films echo a Bazinian idea that the camera reframes the world in such a way as to awaken our senses. In other words, these are common scenes from everyday situations, though not typically recognizable in our own daily routines. We rarely dwell on the mundane and the banal, but cinema transforms the quotidian into something worth investigating. With this, these films use comedic realism to also confirm one of cinema's greatest achievements: its capacity to provoke self-reflexivity on the level of the audience response. In this instance, to watch a screen is to look upon it and see oneself, and see daily life in all its bareness from the outside, as if in a daydream.

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Notes

1. Robert Bresson, trans. Jonathan Griffin, *Notes on the Cinematographer* (Copenhagen: Green Integer, 1997), 14-15. [[return to page 1](#)]

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Brad Pitt sporting an inguinal crease in *Fight Club*.



Alexander Skarsgard in *Tarzan*.

Pain & Gain, global workout culture, and the neoliberal ascetic ideal

by [Juan Llamas-Rodriguez](#)

The inguinal crease — also known as the love line, the Michelangelo muscle, or the moneymaker — is a perplexing feature. It refers to two ligaments that originate in a man's hips and stretch down to his thighs, creating a v-shape pointing towards the crotch area. Attention to this part of the male anatomy skyrocketed after Brad Pitt's performance in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 2005), and since then, men interested in fitness have become obsessed with how to acquire this prized possession. Strictly speaking, all men have an inguinal crease, but it is buried under layers of fat. In order to make these ligaments pop, men need to lower their body fat to 5-8% and constantly work the core muscles to firm up the abdominal area.

The inguinal crease is a unique synecdoche for the project of this article. For one, its emergence as a distinctive physical attribute parallels the rise of global fitness culture. As a feature visible only after the surface levels are stripped out, it is likewise an anatomic metaphor for the base-superstructure relationship between fitness culture and the economic changes of the late 20th century. As well, because it attracts so much male attention, it acts as an index for the struggle over meanings of the white male body in the wake of the late capitalist developments of the early 21st century. The inguinal crease provides the locus from which these three threadlines depart, threadlines that this article tracks in order to take account of what fitness culture and its concerns mean for contemporary power formations. In the following sections, I analyze the film *Pain & Gain* (Michael Bay, 2013), as well as online workout videos, in order to theorize the emergence of global fitness culture, the role this culture plays in giving a contemporary purpose to the male body, and finally, the ways fitness represents one form to confront the crisis of purpose in the wake of neoliberalism.

The rise of a global fitness culture

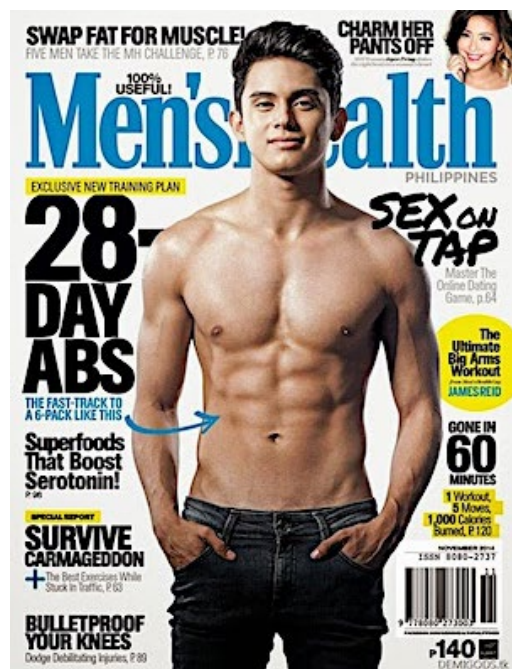
Fitness has become a pronounced cultural movement of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. While the 1970s are usually marked as the beginning of the “fitness craze” in the United States, the post-WWII era transformations of daily life already set the stage for this development. Jobs became more sedentary at the same time that exercise environments underwent a makeover from “dark, smelly gyms” to “modern, luxurious-feeling health clubs.”[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Soon, public stakeholders such as government spokespeople, non-governmental organizations, and education advocates extolled physical exercise as a central factor in the health status of young people in the nation. Fitness became a distinct way of life, a concatenation of meanings and values promoted by institutions and individuals with varying interests. Fitness transformed into a culture, a configuration of interests and activities around working out — training techniques, diets, motivational mantras — elevated to markers of personal growth



Chris Hemsworth in *Thor*.



Tom Hiddleston in *High Rise*.



Actor James Reid on the cover of *Men's Health Philippines*.

and social value. This diverse set of activities has only intensified in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

In the early 2000s in the United States, men spent over \$2 billion USD on commercial gym memberships and another \$2 billion USD on gym equipment for the home. The paid circulation of the popular magazine *Men's Health* skyrocketed from 250,000 in 1998 to 1.8 million in 2005.[2] Personal training became a successful, viable career in the past twenty years; nowadays, Hollywood superstars and Wall Street honchos alike employ personal trainers to design fitness plans around their individual needs.[3] Training techniques, diets, and what is termed the “philosophy of the gym” circulate globally through magazines, online blogs and discussion forums, and international competitions. Images of fit bodies and ideals about body measurements are also manufactured, modeled, and sold on a global market.[4] Industries with global appeal, like Hollywood, increasingly participate in and profit from the traffic in inordinately fit bodies. As a *Men's Journal* feature on the state of Hollywood male stardom succinctly put it, actors “simply don't get [their] name on a movie poster these days unless [they've] got a superhero's physique — primed for high-def close-ups and global market appeal.”[5]

How did fitness gain such a hold on contemporary society? At its core, fitness culture is emblematic of broader economic shifts characteristic of the late 20th century. In particular, the establishment of a full-fledged fitness industry depended on and mirrored the shift to a service and consumption-based economy.[6] Personal trainers, for instance, are ideal examples of the new working class of the service economy: self-employed, entrepreneurial, precarious.[7] The proliferation of diets, protein shake mixes, special supplements, and even illicit steroids produce a thriving consumption economy around fitness. Likewise, fit bodies yield substantial exchange value. Bulging biceps, defined broad shoulders, and six-pack abs are bought and sold as the ultimate markers of affluence, status, and power.

Fitness culture has gained a global foothold, yet its emphasis on consumption and its intrinsic relation to leisure figure it as a distinctly cosmopolitan culture.[8] The spread of the *Men's Health* brand is a perfect example of this. Its reach is substantial, with magazines in over 20 countries across Latin America, Europe, South and East Asia, yet the target audience remains middle to upper-middle class throughout, evidenced by the magazine's emphasis on buying nutritional supplements, equipment, and plans to achieve fitness goals. The shift into service and consumption-based economies provides a set of “productive forces” that trace and contour the establishment of fitness culture, but it must not be understood as a strictly economic determinant for these changes.[9]

Fitness is not only a class-setting activity, however; it is also a pleasurable one. The purported fun of working out frames it as a leisure activity, thereby disassociating it from obligation and its historical negative connotations of compulsory exercise classes.[10] Working out is now a thing to do for your own pleasure in your free time. Indeed, it attests to this time's very existence. Yet, as Theodor Adorno already warned in 1953, the ordained pleasures are “no longer



The bodies on display in fitness magazine covers are often photoshopped to resemble lighter skin tones, as in the case of this cover from *Men's Health India*.

pleasures at all, but really the duties as which they are rationalized.”[11] Leisure time activities, rather than providing a respite from work, are increasingly seized by the same rational self-interest that permeates industrious behavior. Despite being marketed as purveyors of self-realization, these activities become requirements for maintaining one’s social status or for climbing the work ladder. Indeed, the fitness paragon of a lean, built, healthy man symbolizes not only the work put into shaping his body but also his class standing as someone who is able to devote the leisure time and economic resources to build this shapely figure.

Working out is thus a particular kind of work. For one, it is paradoxical in that it refers to work done to the body, but it ejects this work’s value outside the worker’s body. In Marxist terms, it alienates the work’s output. The worker’s labor becomes an object that exists outside him, “independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him.”[12] Susan Willis argues that working out performs the contradictory synthesis of work and leisure, “isolat[ing] the individual for the optimal expenditure of selectively focused effort aimed at the production of the quintessential body object.”[13] Willis concludes that any health benefits acquired from working out pale in comparison with the subjugation endured by conforming to the capitalist dictates of contemporary fitness culture.

Working out also functions as a form of labor. Screen actors, professional athletes, and fashion models, for instance, often consider their workouts as part of their job requirements. Albeit differently inflected, the same could be said of laymen. Despite the increase in so-called knowledge and creative jobs that require less physical strength, these careers still place inordinately strenuous demands on laborers, such as longer workweeks and unhealthy amounts of time sitting down. The sudden popularity of “deskercise,” micro workout routines anyone can perform at his desk in short bursts at a time, testifies to the inherent need for physical activity to maintain productive office workers.[14] At the same time, the withdrawal of state assistance in its citizens’ well-being has led to the commodification of personal health and to the development of a well-oiled fitness industry. Late capitalist development thrives on every set of bench presses and deadlifts performed by its workers in their own leisure time.

It is no coincidence then that the rise of fitness culture has paralleled the establishment of what has been variously called late stage capitalism or neoliberalism. Throughout this article, the establishment of a “neoliberal order” refers to two interrelated, mutually reinforcing factors. First is the global instantiation of policies such as privatization of public assets, deregulation of labor markets, and contraction of democratic institutions. Second is the range of cultural phenomena, including popular media, leisure activities, and consumerist practices, that promote an individualistic conception of human personhood, where self-betterment and entrepreneurship are valorized above community organizing and structural change.[15] Both these factors are present in various forms within the contemporary formation I call global fitness culture: the privatization of health and wellness, the precarity of flexible labor conditions, and the ideology that a fit body indexes self-fulfillment. Fitness thus represents one area where the struggles over meaning and power play out under this neoliberal order.

The meanings of muscles

If the maintenance of fitness culture depends on a thriving industry built around it, an industry that has only gotten stronger in the past decade, then every glistening, toned set of abs symbolizes the superstructure of a late capitalist



Pain & Gain: Flags and other symbols of U.S. supremacy appear in the background throughout scenes where the men are buying guns or attempting to carry out their kidnapping plan.

economic order. Nowhere is the connection between capitalist resourcefulness and fitness excellence more pronounced than in Michael Bay's musclehead romp *Pain & Gain* (2013). Fitness trainer Danny Lupo, played by Mark Wahlberg, and his two ripped accomplices Adrian Doorbal (Anthony Mackie) and Paul Doyle (Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson) spend their days at a Miami gym. Although it is his job to help people of all body sizes get in shape, Danny notoriously dislikes the plump yet carefree clients who parade around the health center. "The way to prove yourself is to better yourself," he claims. For Danny, capital gains should be measured in muscle mass; a person's worth is tantamount to the effort they exert on the press bench. It is the greatest of injustices that he should be struggling financially despite his physical prowess while his wealthy clients schlump their way to the one percent.

The pristine fitness club where Danny works contrasts with the dingy gym where he works out with his buddies, a spartan setting whose few decorations include an oversized U.S. flag. In this and other scenes, the specter of crumbling U.S. hegemony haunts the film's narrative of wounded white masculinity and restoration through devotion to neoliberal fitness. For Danny and his accomplices, the solution to their undeserved lower status is to take matters into their hands, and to take from others: they kidnap Danny's millionaire client Victor Kershaw, take over his assets, and attempt (unsuccessfully) to kill him. The scheme grants them temporary wealth, but it soon dissipates. When the musclemen attempt a second grift, they become victims of their own greediness and carelessness, and eventually get caught by the film's straight man, a retired detective played by Ed Harris.

Danny's belief that physical fitness should beget economic gain is partly founded on an understanding of power as bodily constructed, a line of thought not unlike the anatomo-politics that Michel Foucault diagnoses. Foucault argues that, starting in the 17th century, control over life became a constitutive element of the execution of power, and suggests that one of its central tenets was centered on the body. The disciplining of the body encompasses

"the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, [and] its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls."^[16]

That the body should be treated as a machine functioned as one of the fundamental tenets in the exertion of power. These techniques of bodily control were present in all aspects of society and were effectively utilized by various institutions, including economic organizations and the powers that sustained these. Notably, Foucault also dictated that this anatomo-politics served as a form of segregation and social hierarchization, "guaranteeing relations of domination and effects of hegemony."^[17] New forms of power that did not derive from a traditional right of sovereignty found a place in the shape of rights over life, as in the right

"to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or 'alienations.'"^[18]

In the West, this emphasis on the body as the locus of power permeates institutions such as medicine, the military, and manufacturing — but only until recently. Indeed, the emergence of fitness culture parallels the proliferation of neoliberal ideals not only because of the shift toward individual responsibility over health and wellness, but also because of the revalorization of the body in the wake of the so-called "knowledge economy."^[19] As industries predicated on



Danny Lupo disgusted by the plump patrons at Sun Gym, the fitness club where he works.

manual laborers leave Western countries, the prevalence of professions with strict physical requirements sharply decreases. Foucault's theorization of the body as the site of power struggles continues to have purchase in this new economic order, but this residual notion needs to be reformulated once the laborers' bodies are not immediately involved in the production cycle. Instead, Foucault's anatomo-politics become not only about power engendered in the managing of bodies but also about the value created in the shaping of these bodies. It is telling that fitness culture carries a distinct class connotation to it since the wealthier classes are more likely to be those who participate in the knowledge economy and thus can repurpose their bodies to symbolize affluence.

There is also a gendered dimension to this repurposing of the body. Anxieties over the meaning of the male body escalate in an economic environment where biological differences are less determining of career prospects. Whereas a time when physical work was predominant provided a (flawed) rationale for a gendered division of labor, the knowledge economy requires no such division. Following Judith Butler's notion that gender's performativity always already functions as a regulatory mechanism,[20] the emergence of anatomo-politics centered on the physical might of the body signals a performative reaction to the allowances that, however miniscule, have changed the gender composition of workforces in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Although it is increasingly a culture adopted by all genders, the initial appeal of fitness culture offers for heterosexual white men a new terrain on which to exert power and extract value from their bodies.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that sexuality became an object of fascination because "power delineated it, aroused it, and employed it as the proliferating meaning that had always to be taken control of." [21] Power



The dingy gym where Danny works out contrasts with the sunny fitness club where he works.



The ideological conflation of white masculinity and U.S. hegemony haunts the narrative of *Pain & Gain*.

necessitated the emergence of sexuality as a category in order to exercise control. Such centrality is not unlike that administered to fitness a century later. Fitness, in its new formulation as a culture around the neoliberal body, is “an effect with a meaning-value.” That is, the ever more defined abs of a certain class of fitness enthusiasts stand as signifiers of a new global economic order, one that redefines personal responsibility as physical prowess, working out as leisure, and the discipline of the body as the symbol of success.

Yet, this is only part of the picture. Understanding the economic milieu wherein fitness culture arises may provide context for these developments, but as Stuart Hall argues, the economic cannot provide “the contents of particular thoughts of particular social classes” nor can it “guarantee for all time which ideas will be made use of by which classes.”[22] The investment in fitness, the valorization of a fit body, and the distributive management of the practices undertaken to produce this fit body certainly illustrate much about what is at stake in late capitalist formations. But there is also an individual component to these formations. In order to further illustrate the work that fitness does in contemporary society, we must account for the multiple meaning-making practices occurring in the formation of this culture.

Language proves a generative starting point in this regard. In popular parlance, a person who spends an unusual amount of time at the gym is called a gym rat or a gym bunny. Depending on the context, the distinction between these two terms is often negligible, but some definitional purists will set it as such: while both spend a great amount of time working out, gym bunnies do so for the sole purpose of sculpting their body in order to show it off. Gym bunnies are into working out for aesthetic reasons, for pure vanity.

In *Pain & Gain*, Anthony Mackie’s character Adrian aptly exemplifies this stance. He has no discernible skills beyond his work out. He is almost single-handedly concerned with gaining muscle mass by any means necessary. His dependence on steroids transfers the phallic signification from his now permanently impotent penis to his perpetually bulging biceps. Gym bunnies get a bad reputation for being solely focused on appearance rather than functionality. Yet, for them, fitness has a clear albeit narrowly defined goal. Gym rats are less purposeful. Working out is an end in itself, but it is not a goal. Ultimately, the difference between gym rats and gym bunnies turns out to be the *meaning* assigned to the action of working out by the person performing it.

Meaning undoubtedly shifts across time. Friedrich Nietzsche argues that the entire history of a thing — a custom, a practice, an object — is akin to a “continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations” whose causes are not necessarily related to one another.[23] Indeed, the emergence of fitness culture results from a change in the general meaning for the action of working out, from a niche activity reserved for athletes, soldiers, or bodybuilders to something everyone (of a certain class) should do. The form of any one thing may fluctuate over time — resistance-based, outdoors workouts shift to machine-based, indoor practices — but in many ways it remains a similar sequence of procedures. The meaning attached to these forms, however, is much more fluid. Nietzsche argues that these meanings are

“only *signs* that a will to power has become master of something less

powerful and imposed upon it the character of a function.”[24]

Despite conceptualizing fitness as a “way of life,” as a newfound type of culture, it is also imperative to consider that this culture contains multitudes. Working out remains a “multiaccented practice,” where power struggles are best analyzed as instances of agents fighting over control of a practice’s meaning.[25] Different wills to power place different purposes to the action of working out, such as personal betterment, labor productivity, aesthetic embellishment, or health strengthening. Tracing these different meanings, as well as the function they perform for different wills to power, sketches more widely the importance of fitness in the current moment. Still, the question remains why working out attracts so many disparate yet forceful purposes. *Pain & Gain* allows us to trace one such direction of wills.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Pain & Gain within the fitness industrial complex



Four different compositions throughout the same scene center Wahlberg's Calvin Klein trunks.

Pain & Gain participates in a broader network that connects the fitness and entertainment industries, a set of connections best exemplified in the trend of promoting Hollywood blockbusters with branded workout routines. Superhero franchises have been the quickest to adopt this advertising technique, fomenting competing ideologies about their actors' superhuman physiques and the attainability of these physiques through commodified training regimes.[26] Even blockbusters whose narratives have no direct link to the promotion of workout culture follow this trend, as in the case of *The Legend of Tarzan* (David Yates, 2016). Despite the film's star Alexander Skarsgard continually bemoaning the unpleasantness of his workout regime, the film's marketing centered on the extraordinary physique the actor attained to play a man from the jungle and on the means for replicating such a body. Ironically, the promotional video "Tarzan Challenge," which features celebrity personal trainers Nick Hounslow and Teri Ann Krefting demonstrating a series of exercises on a jungle-themed set, ignores formal conventions of the training video such as performing an entire set of exercises in real-time.[27] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) In failing to deliver a workable workout routine, the video betrays its exclusively promotional nature. The contradiction between pain and pleasure, and between extraordinary bodies and the ordinary means to achieve them, becomes a structuring ideology for the fitness industrial complex.

Focusing on *Pain & Gain* allows for a sustained examination of the rise of global fitness culture as tied to mainstream Hollywood productions and of the function of working out as neoliberal ascetic ideal. Michael Bay's feature provides a unique entry into these concerns because, even as it allows for instances of critique, the film remains tied to the celebration of fit bodies and of its star actors, particularly Mark Wahlberg. Late in the film, during a climactic scene where the protagonists attempt to chop the bodies of a former investor and his wife, Danny and Adrian strip down to their underwear to perform the messy procedure. As the mobile camera follows Danny back and forth between the body parts and the tools, it continuously catches glimpses of Danny's underwear, the white Calvin Klein trunks that Wahlberg is known for promoting. Michael Bay's predilection for multiple camera setups at various angles across the 180-degree line results in the centering of Wahlberg's back and underwear throughout the sequence even as his character moves around frantically. The film retains a fascination with the actor's body and its commercial appeal despite the purported separation between him and the fictional character he plays. Further conflating the star appeal with the film is the fact that the Blu-ray release of *Pain & Gain* includes a discount coupon for Wahlberg's line of nutritional supplements, MARKED.

It is hardly surprising that the rise of a fitness industrial complex would thrive in unison with big-budget media productions. Hollywood productions are not merely the creators and distributors of these new fitness ideals; they are also subject to and dependent on the commercial practices that result from this cult of fitness. Positioned at the intersection of the fitness and entertainment industries, screen actors function as promoters for both industries through their performances, their participation in promotional campaigns, and their own lifestyle, extensively detailed in glossy magazines and online forums[28]. The narrative of the perfect body delivered by the fitness industry, where "the body



Promotional coupon for Mark Wahlberg's line of nutritional supplements, MARKED, in the Blu-ray edition of *Pain & Gain*.

can be moulded, sculptured, and trained into perfection,” is perfectly compatible with the entertainment industry’s traffic in exorbitant beauty and body standards. [29] Such ideals are equally normative across industries: fitness magazines’ promotion of an athletic, well-built, white, and healthy man apes the generic mold established for Hollywood actors.

White muscles have always been laden with ideologies of power and aspirations of greatness. Richard Dyer, for instance, argues for the continuities between bodybuilding and mainstream cinema representations as paragons of white masculinity. Noting the references in these activities to classical antiquity and to the “California lifestyle” — an emphasis on health, leisure, and naturalness — Dyer concludes that Hollywood productions glorify the ideal body of whiteness as hard, *achieved*, wealthy, hairless, and tanned.[30] The examples Dyer evokes include early cinematic depictions of Tarzan, muscleman romps centered around a male star, and the mid-20th century peplum films focused on heroes from classical antiquity — all examples that the early 21st century resurgence of fitness culture tied to Hollywood productions remakes. In the muscleman romps and peplum films, Dyer notes a tension between the ideologically charged images of the strong man (as colonialist or fascist, respectively) and the white working class anxieties into which these films tapped. In evoking the muscled white hero, these films implicitly reinforced the greatness of (masculine) whiteness, even if — or precisely because — this evocation was marked with the histories of white hegemonic sites of power.

The current nexus between global fitness industries and mainstream entertainment furthers these ideological implications of white muscles with working class anxieties about hegemony at the same time that it evokes the new economic moment in which both industries thrive, or what has been previously defined as neoliberal capitalism. In the next two sections, I argue that fitness is both symptomatic and emblematic of the crisis of purpose in neoliberal times. Following the secession of religion and science to economics as the avenue for transcendence, neoliberal ideals stand as the marker for the fulfillment of human purpose. Rising from these economic shifts, fitness culture presents the exemplary embodiment of these ideals and hints at the effects that result when these ideals eventually fall apart.

Fitness as a neoliberal ascetic ideal

In *Pain & Gain*, Danny’s attachment to working out as a source of personal fulfillment is also related to his predilection for attending sessions with motivational speakers. Early in the film he attends a seminar run by a man called Jonny Wu, played by Ken Jeong. Set against a banner with the words “Get Off Your Lazy American Ass,” Jonny berates his audience for failing to *want* to act, as



Ken Jeong plays a hack motivational speaker who berates his audience for not being “do-ers.”



Jonny Wu focuses on Danny, who feels particularly interpellated to become a do-er.



Jonny and Danny stand amongst an impressionable crowd of wanna-be do-ers.



In *Crossfit for Jesus*, fake televangelist JC sells carrying a cross as a fitness ideal and life goal.

if merely desiring something was tantamount to having it. The motivational speaker is a caricature of countless grifters who promise that fulfillment is merely about calling things forth. His ideological implication that it is in the individual where sole responsibility for fortune or misfortune lies is summarized in his mantra, “Get a goal. Get a plan. And Get off your ass.” The manipulator sets his sights on Danny, an impressionable gym rat eager to find direction, hovers over him despite their height differences, and forces him to yell that he is a do-er. Framed in a long shot where the motivational speaker and the musclehead are the only two people standing, Danny’s celebration that he is a do-er underscores his belief that he is a unique individual even as the chants in unison from the crowd reinforce that he is merely one amongst hundreds of other easily impressionable audience members.

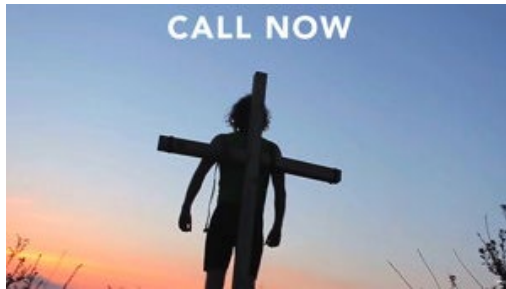
Belief is an operative word in the relationship the antiheroes of *Pain & Gain* have to their workouts. “I believe in fitness,” proclaims Danny in the opening lines of the film. Danny’s belief system is fitness because he founds his morality on strict fitness ideals. Fitness is a religion of sorts, in purpose if not in practice. But a Collegehumor video titled *Cross Fit for Jesus* takes Danny’s statement to the limit. Mocking the now ubiquitous model of the fitness training infomercial, *Cross Fit for Jesus* presents a longhaired man nicknamed JC who explains that, although he did not begin carrying a wooden cross by choice, he soon realized that his “biggest burden was also his biggest opportunity.”[31] In the same self-affirming tone characteristic of both fitness infomercials and televangelists, JC sells the idea that his patented, 100% mahogany holy cross is the perfect equipment for achieving all your workout goals. Religion provides the meaning for working out in this parodic video. Clips of various people exercising with this wooden cross constitute what JC calls the “divine calorie burning experience” of his program. Everyone’s cross to bear becomes a literal cross, one that can render visible results on your physique. Extending Danny Lupo’s purported belief in fitness, *Cross Fit for Jesus* further illustrates the parallels between religion and fitness.

Part of this parallelism is formal: the video takes advantage of the peculiarly similar methods of selling fitness routines and religious conversion on television. First person testimonials convey the narrative of the advertisement. Shots of the extraordinary individual performing feats the audience can only aspire towards are intercut with flashing text reminding this audience of the urgency to action. “Call Now” becomes a rallying cry that mandates subservience to a just-in-time logic characteristic of neoliberal capitalism. These similarities at the level of form are not coincidental. Televangelists’ and fitness gurus’ methods operate in similar ways because they offer similar products. By appealing to either transcendental concerns and divine guidance or material concerns and bodily regiments, these television merchants sell instructions for everyday life. They promote not only techniques for how to conduct oneself, physically or spiritually, but also reasons why one should choose to do so. In short, they provide meaning to the individual’s life.

In their use of parody, both *Cross Fit for Jesus* and *Pain & Gain* underscore the purpose of working out explored in this article. Working out, I contend, performs nowadays what Nietzsche diagnosed as the function of the ascetic ideal. Whether it is of the divine or scientific variety, Nietzsche proposes that the ascetic ideal represents man’s adherence to capital-T Truth. The will to truth is “faith in the ascetic ideal itself,” or the belief that there is some higher meaning that one can



JC demonstrates the workout achieved by carrying around a mahogany cross.



Spoofing both fitness and religious infomercials, *Crossfit for Jesus* conveys a sense of urgency to action in order to obtain its promised rewards.

ascribe to Truth. The ascetic ideal is Nietzsche's way of explaining why people adhere to certain regimens of behavior and understanding. By following a particular religion, or a certain scientific method, or (more recently) a specific economic order, people are able to make sense of their existence, including their daily routines, decision-making, and belief systems. The ascetic ideal's adherence to a higher Truth is tied to a striving for meaning: broadly, life's meaning, but particularly, meaning for life's suffering. Nietzsche's contention is that humans' response to the struggles of living is to search for a meaning to attach to this suffering. An ascetic ideal becomes compelling because, at its most basic, it offers people a way to rationalize the angst of everyday existence. Although the forms of attachment may change over time, people "will rather will *nothingness* than *not* will." [32] Finding a purpose, whatever it may be, is preferred to doing without meaning.

Fitness stands as one iteration of the ascetic ideal in the era of late capitalism. If the reigning paradigm for our times is that of neoliberalism, of market logics permeating all institutions of society, [33] then fitness allows for the targeting of meaning for a particular sector of people. For one, fitness culture is a symptom and consequence of neoliberal changes. As well, the work in working out reframes the purpose of the body and physicality in the wake of the knowledge economy. A former academic turned mechanic suggests that "the greater sense of agency and competence [he] always felt doing manual work' contrasts with the 'sense of uselessness' endemic in 'other jobs that were officially recognized as 'knowledge work.'" [34] This return to manual labor is not for everyone, but as the explosion of 24-hour gyms reveals, knowledge workers at all levels increasingly seek to include physical work into their daily routines. As I argued earlier, the meanings attached to working out may vary, but the consistency lies in that, once exercise has been packaged as an individual responsibility, there must be some meaning attached to this work beyond its material results. In *Pain & Gain*, Danny's belief in fitness symbolizes that his physical power accounts for his self-esteem and his sense of purpose. Even more explicitly, the parody video *Cross Fit for Jesus* hammers the point that the physical suffering resulting from carrying a wooden cross should amount to something, which in that case is well-defined shoulders and core muscles.

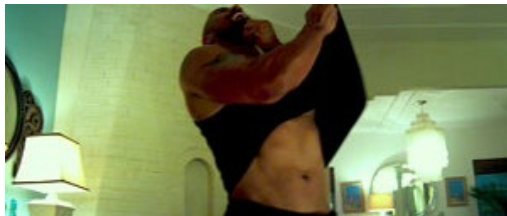
Loss of meaning and the turn to violence

Nietzsche holds that we cannot separate strength from expressions of strength, "as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was free to express strength or not to do so." [35] How someone or something is awarded its status of being is only through the actions he undertakes. There is no such substratum behind the strong or weak man; rather, the strong or weak-willed actions define what type of man one is. For Nietzsche, there is no being behind doing: "the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed — the deed is everything." [36] The protagonists of *Pain & Gain* are nothing if not parodic inversions of Nietzsche's "doing behind being." They believe themselves to be strong men on account of their physical abilities and deduce from these that they are strong men in other areas of their life. In their role as the buffoons, these men belie the contradictions of fitness as an ascetic ideal. Workouts may provide meaning for these characters, but it is a meaning that cannot compensate for the many other ways they are lacking. Their mistaken equation of fitness strength with economic clout becomes evident as their multiple get-rich schemes come tumbling down.

Once the riches from their first kidnapping and attempted murder run out, the men hatch yet another ill-conceived grift to maintain their newfound luxurious



Danny attempts, and fails, to close a deal with the investor while ...



... his colleagues amuse the investor's wife with their bodies.



Bay transitions between the two rooms by having the roaming camera "travel" through cracks in the walls.

lifestyle. The meeting with a potential investor for this scheme functions as a primal scene for Danny and his accomplices, a moment of recognition that they were always in over their juiced heads. The sequence alternates between two settings within Adrian's home: the weight room, where Danny attempts to negotiate with the investor; and the living room, where Adrian and Paul entertain the investor's wife. Although Danny was once convinced this deal would proceed smoothly, he soon realizes that the investor thinks very little of him and wants to shut him out of the dealings. Danny's pleas that they have a "special skill set" contrast with shots of Adrian and Paul doing pushups and flexing their biceps, displays of physicality meant to amuse the investor's wife. Danny's insistence that they are accomplished businessmen is simultaneously undermined by his accomplices' antics, proof of their inability to have a conversation without devolving into primal demonstrations of physical power.

The sequence formally renders the out-of-control spiraling in which the protagonists find themselves. In order to show the action across both settings, the camera constantly moves in a circular direction around the room, often passing next to the characters. When it seems the camera is about to approach a wall, it instead "travels" through a hole in the wall into the other room. These motions figure the developments within both settings as a continuous spiral, dizzying the spectator just as the protagonists' actions become even more desperate. The emphasis on the cracks on the wall as conduits for these circular motions also reinforce the emotional state the main characters are in as their best laid plans begin to fissure and crumble.

The parodic clash throughout this sequence reaches its acme when, in a burst of anger, Danny kills the investor with a weight plate. Once his self-confidence — thus far tied to his physical might — is destroyed, the very object of his self-assurance becomes the weapon for his lashing out. Danny's will to succeed suffers when it is exposed as nothing but a sham, revealing that his equating of economic acumen and physical fitness was a tragic miscalculation. It is precisely this emphasis on wills to power that elucidates the struggle for meaning over working out. Danny Lupo believes in fitness because it provides a standard for his life and it directs his will towards clearly defined, easily measured goals. However, fitness turns out to be a faulty standard on which to found his business acumen. While Danny's will remains unflagging almost throughout the entire film, his continuous attempts at forcing his way to a better economic position eventually get him and his friends thrown in prison.

In *White*, Richard Dyer warns that among the problems with "looking at whiteness" lies the risk of fueling a "fascist chic," a reactionary attempt to reinstate, or make a show of reinstating, while male power.[37] Dyer's warnings just as resonant twenty-five years later, including the resurgence of a new fascist chic and a series of waves of nationalist discontent against the effects of unequal distribution in global economic processes. Nativist racism and the political forces that thrive on it are not new nor exclusive to the West, and their implications reach further than popular media representations. Analyzing global fitness culture's implication in the traffic of white bodies as exemplaries of neoliberal asceticism may therefore not deliver pragmatic solutions to such pressing concerns. Still, this analysis provides an aperture from which to diagnose the forms, symbols, and affects of a particular direction of wills at this historical conjuncture. *Pain & Gain* gestures at the neoliberal conditions of possibility for global fitness cultures, at the attachments that fitness could have for populations that imagine themselves as disenfranchised within this new economic order, and at the violence that erupts when such attachments are found to be misplaced. The film remains invested in the aura of fitness as aspirational, as evidenced by its



The sequence reaches its violent apex when the protagonists' tool for betterment becomes revealed as a weapon to compensate for their failings.

fascination with its muscled stars and its participation in a growing entertainment-fitness industrial complex. At the same time, because of its implication in these broader networks, the film also offers superstructural evidence of the various cracks in these interlocking economic processes.

Indeed, it is a physiological maxim that one cannot shape a specific part of the body exclusively. Muscle building can be managed by performing exercises designed to target one set of muscles, but fat is allocated across the body so working out one specific area does not translate into losing fat therein. Genetics also affects how body fat is distributed and how muscles can be toned. Yet, the single most sold fitness mantra is that any one regimen or machine will definitively rid your body of belly fat, or form your six-pack abs, or shape your thigh gap. At its most commodified, fitness is often full of false hopes and misguided techniques. These tales of misplaced aims bring us back to the inguinal crease, a much sought-after feature that can only be targeted tangentially. It therefore remains virtually unattainable, available only to those with the leisure time, disposable income, and discipline to pursue it — as well as genetic good fortune. This physical trait stands as an index of the rise of a global fitness culture, as a metaphor for the multiplicity of meanings attached to working out, and as a lightning rod for the direction of wills to power in the advent of late capitalism. Finally, it also represents the struggles to combat aimlessness of purpose amidst the global changes at this conjuncture, such as the efforts to reinsert physical work into everyday life and to provide a purpose for the white male body in the knowledge economy. The inguinal crease is ultimately less an effect than a symptom, an epiphenomenon of the structural and meaning-making mechanisms that remain in flux as the 21st century unfolds.

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Notes

1. Shelly McKenzie, 2013. *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2013): 10. [[return to page 1](#)]
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 27. Warner Bros. Pictures, "Tarzan Challenge," *YouTube*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5L4-w9WJTnM> [return to page 27]
 28. Heather Addison pursues a similar argument about the implication of the entertainment industry in selling ideal bodies through more avenues than just its audiovisual materials. See Heather Addison, *Hollywood and the Rise of Physical Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



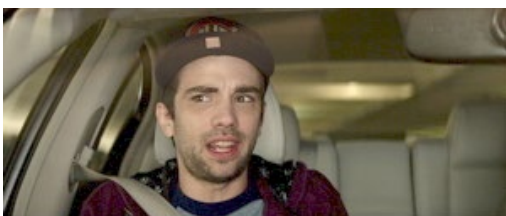
The homosocial group of male survivors confront their common enemy in *This is the End*.



Danny McBride plays the enemy, taunting the male group.



Jay Baruchel and Seth Rogen as an agonized bromantic couple at the start of the film.



Baruchel hides his feelings of ambivalence about

“Goodnight, my sweet guys.” *This is the End*, bromance, and homophobia

by [David Greven](#)

Directed by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, *This is the End* (2013) fuses the elements of the beta male comedy, in which the losers prevail over the alpha males, and the bromance. Its metafictional elements make it significant as a commentary on these male-centered comedy sub-genres that came into prominence in the ‘00s. The film’s stars play themselves and play off their publicized real-life relationships. A box-office hit, the movie continues to have a recognizable pop-culture life: for example, in 2015, it was announced that *This is the End 3D* would be the fifth maze coming to Halloween Horror Nights at Universal Studios Hollywood.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

This apocalypse-comedy indexes the tropes and troubles associated with post-millennial cinematic masculinities. It incorporates the beta male comedy’s anxieties over the future of young men, specifically white young men, who demonstrate little interest in moving forward with their lives, much less with pursuing corporate success. The sociologist Michael Kimmel has characterized this demographic as “Guyland.”[2] At the same time, *This is the End* uneasily prefigures disruptions in the male status quo, particularly in terms of race, sexuality, and male group identity, on visible display at present. In many ways, *This is the End* ponders what happens when conventional masculinity is “replaced” by alternative identities. And the movie corresponds in this regard to other masculinity-in-crisis comedies such as *Neighbors* (Nicholas Stoller, 2014) and its 2016 sequel, *The Change-Up* (David Dobkin, 2011), and *Crazy, Stupid Love* (Glenn Ficarra, John Requa, 2011), which thematize male fears of obsolescence.

Several films of the early ‘00s can be described as “beta male” comedies: Todd Phillips’ *The Hangover* (2009), David Gordon Green’s *Pineapple Express* (2008), Nicholas Stoller’s *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), Greg Mottola’s *Superbad* (2007), and especially Judd Apatow’s definitive *The Forty Year Old Virgin* (2005) and *Knocked Up* (2007). These films foreground males who defy leading-man standards, being physically unconventional looking, unemployed, socially inept, adrift, or in other ways nonnormative. The U.S. masculinity-in-crisis myth that has been with us since at least second wave feminism, always taking on new forms, manifests itself in the beta male movie as the disaffected protagonist’s refusal to mature, which typically means getting married and a profitable job. Generally, with some exceptions, the beta male eschews the usual trajectory of masculine success in the capitalist social order.

However, just when beta male comedies were coming into focus, they began to cede ground to the newer and much more widely known subgenre of the

his friendship with Rogen, and will attend the Franco house party unwillingly.



Rogen tries to jolly Baruchel into homosocial camaraderie.



The lure of bromance and inclusion in the homosocial is the opportunity to return to teenage joys like playing video games together...



Smoking weed with one another...



Shared irresponsibility and transgression allows men to reclaim their boyish selves together.

bromance. Certainly, considerable overlaps between both exist. The definitive bromance film—also the most resonant and affecting of the male-centered comedies of the ‘00s—John Hamburg’s *I Love You, Man* (2009) is unmistakably also a beta male comedy in that the hero, Peter Klaven (Paul Rudd) is clearly in the inferior position to the man who becomes his loved friend, Sydney Fife (Jason Segel). His inferiority stems from his inability to make male friendships and his overly feminized masculinity—errors the friendship with Sydney corrects.

Michael De Angelis has edited a remarkable collection of essays, *Reading the Bromance*, that charts bromance’s ascendance (I hope my assessment will not be invalidated by my admission that I am a contributor to the volume).[3] In an essay in this book, Hilary Radner notes,

“Film fans have become adventurous in their usage of the term... The contemporary bromance makes explicit something that was always implicit in the buddy film, most notably the intensity of the masculine bond, something that was left unsaid at the time but now can be discussed openly.”

Radner does not specifically name homosexuality as the “unsaid” now given voice; instead, she refers to the greater public acceptance of shifting gender roles and “gender complexity.” The bromance’s “contradictory social messages” allow it at once to be “a plea for the legitimization male friendship” and the emotional bond at its core, usually an “unspoken” one, an expression of an attitude toward homosociality steeped in “coy hipness” and the exclusion of women.[4] I will return to the latter point.

In a review of this book and another in the field, Peter C. Kunze notes,

“The term ‘bromance’ has found its most active deployment in discussions of comedies, particularly those directed and/or produced by Judd Apatow... some authors appear to use ‘bromance’ and ‘buddy film’ interchangeably. I would argue this perception is a mistake; the term ‘bromance’ in its very construction queers brotherhood, finding an erotic and emotional complexity that goes beyond normative male friendship. Bromance films are a specific cycle within the genre of buddy film, and their popularity seems linked with the increasing visibility of LGBT communities and culture in the mainstream as well as heated public debates over LGBT rights.”[5]

Kunze is making a more provocative point than he may realize, certainly an arguable one. The bromance may signal a gay/queer sensibility, but in its mainstream uses it designates something quite distinct. Clearly, the central issue in the bromance, why it is so problematic and fascinating, is that it is centered in a passionate emotional relationship between two heterosexual males. And if this is the case, as I argue it is, what are the implications of this emotional bond for heterosexual and queer males alike (and for women, as I will discuss)? Do queer males get siphoned off as the rejected alternative to bromance—bromance gone awry, trespassing into sexual territory—or does the bromance open up a space for male-male intimacy that includes one for queer love, friendship, sexuality, desire?

With some exceptions, the answer to the latter question is a dispiriting “No.” The overlap between beta male comedies and the bromance is a strain of homophobic defensiveness. But this strain does not merely bespeak a defense against homosexual possibilities. Rather, it involves the rampant foregrounding of these possibilities. It involves the seeming tolerance as well as awareness of the existence of gay/queer/trans personae within endlessly generated gags regarding sexual minorities. Homophobia, jokily dangled as bait for a hungry hipster



Physical intimacy confirms the allowable proximity of male bodies in bromances and nonsexual male group encounters.



Early signs of apocalyptic trouble, tellingly located in a developing country.



Neighbors mixes things up by pitting a married suburban couple (Seth Rogen and Rose Byrne) against a fraternity that moves in next door.



The fraternity is led by male friends (Zac Efron and Dave Franco) whose charisma, good looks, and buff bodies...

audience, is only seemingly yanked away before the audience can bite.

Homophobia hides in plain sight in the beta male comedy, which ingeniously exculpates itself for this homophobia by consistently emphasizing an atmosphere of politically incorrect, scatological, perversely excessive humor. It becomes harder, but all the more necessary, to challenge these films' strategies for indulging in the homophobia they put on such rampant display. It's harder, because the extreme nature of the humor would seem to preclude and render irrelevant questions of "sensitivity" and "tolerance"; necessary, because the homophobia in these films is so insidious.

This is the End tracks the transition from the beta male comedy (which focuses on male group identity) to the bromance (usually organized around a deep, if conflictual, relationship between two men); and a peculiar strategy that makes use of homoeroticized homophobia. This strategy, which I call *parodic homophobia*, operates on several levels. First, it establishes a comfort level with homosexuality that distinguishes '00s males from their predecessors, or is meant to do so. This differentiation involves the "coy hipness" that Radner refers to, a seeming demonstration of homo-tolerance and overall sexual with-it-ness on the part of beta males and bromancers. Second, parodic homophobia deflects any charges of homophilic affinity or gay/queer desire. The danger that beta/bro ardor might trespass the grounds of sexual desire and even activity must be staved off. Thirdly, and most predictably, parodic homophobia allows filmmakers and stars to engage in a commercially savvy homophobia while disavowing that they are doing so. As I will discuss, that this is a strategy deployed, roughly speaking, by the Hollywood left makes it no less troubling than the contemporary displays of homophobia on what has come to be known as the alt-right.

I want to take a moment to remind readers of *This is the End's* plot. At a blowout party given by James Franco in Los Angeles, the revelers suddenly confront the biblical Apocalypse. As the world crashes and burns around them, gigantic chasms rip open the Earth. One opens up right outside James Franco's house, swallowing up celebrities. The end of the world is preceded by the Rapture, in which worthy souls are transported into heaven, leaving the damned to face hellish forces on the ground. These infernal creatures roam the land, killing the unworthy.

Seth Rogen, Jay Baruchel, Craig Robinson, Jonah Hill, and, later, Danny McBride all take refuge along with Franco inside his house. Much infighting ensues as the group try to stay alive, with McBride emerging as the common enemy and ousted from the house. Hill is raped and then possessed by a male demon. As they perform an exorcism on Hill, Baruchel and Rogen get into a fight and accidentally knock a candle over, starting a fire in which Franco's house is destroyed and Hill dies. As a result of the fire, the remaining survivors Rogen, Baruchel, Robinson, and Franco desperately venture into the outside world. Eventually, they encounter McBride in his new guise as an evil cannibal overlord. While Franco fails to do so, Rogen, Baruchel, and Robinson make it to Heaven. Robinson, having been made an angel, greets them at the pearly gates. The film concludes with the angel Robinson granting the men wishes: Rogen gets a Segue, Baruchel an appearance from the Backstreet Boys. They sing a musical number, and the heroes join in.

Two notable aspects of the film that occur pre-Apocalypse are the early scenes between Rogen and Baruchel, depicted as friends who have grown apart given Rogen's increasing fame and move to L.A., and the party scene itself. The film commences with a sense of bromance gone awry, as Rogen attempts to re-establish his former closeness with Baruchel. Baruchel feels estranged from Rogen, disliking his LA lifestyle and his friends, Jonah Hill especially, but struggles to maintain the friendship as well. (A great deal of the tensions in the



...represent a masculine ideal that diminishes Rogen.



The fraternity represents both youthfulness and a male homosocial realm bound by no authority.



The film narrows down to a battle between Rogen and Efron steeped in the married man's fascination with his younger rival, including his chiseled, on-display body.



As Rogen says to Efron, a living advertisement for an Abercrombie and Fitch store, "Your body is an arrow that leads to your dick."

relationship appear to stem from the fact that both Rogen and Baruchel are Canadian actors who feel estranged from Hollywood and the United States even as Rogen has found a way to be an A-list U.S. star.) A longing for male companionship informs the movie, and the homosocial enclave that forms at Franco's house as the Apocalypse rages on seems to fulfill this need.

The pre-apocalypse party scene is chiefly notable for its depiction of Michael Cera as a mean, sexually exploitative lout. Cera, another Canadian actor, is still best known for his shy, gentle, if also deeply neurotic persona in the Fox series *Arrested Development* (2003-2013) and such films as *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007, written by Diablo Cody) and *Superbad*. Cera's dorky but sweet and surprisingly strong-minded character in *Juno* has sexual relations with Ellen Page's titular Juno one night, which results in her pregnancy. Cera plays an adolescent male who respects women and rises to his responsibilities, helping Juno raise their child.

In *This is the End*, however, Cera's character is associated with misogyny and crude obnoxiousness. In one scene, Baruchel opens the bathroom door and finds Cera being serviced by two women, one giving him oral sex, the other rimming him, a tableau that evokes the iconography of gay male pornography. And Cera, flaunting his capacious tastes, continuously threatens to ravish the guys in his midst sexually. ("Do you need the bathroom, honey?" he asks the embarrassed Baruchel when he opens the bathroom door, feminizing him provocatively.)

Such scenes are played less for transgressive laughs and more for their shock value, which subtly establishes the party scene as morally questionable and a fitting precursor to the Apocalypse, the revelers as sinners on the verge of damnation. Heterosexuality, however, is largely relegated to the sleazy appetites of the Cera character. Whereas most of the victims of the Apocalypse plunge into the huge abyssal craters that split apart the land, Cera is dramatically impaled by a pole that enters him from behind and pierces him through, and in this fashion borne aloft. Dantean torment is suggested: the punishment fits Cera's sexual crimes, leaving him the penetrated, no longer the pansexual penetrator.

The movie's apocalyptic imagery and surprisingly wholesale adoption of Christian mythology demands more sustained treatment than I can provide here. Certain elements of it, however, are worth incorporating into a larger understanding of the beta/bro comedy. First, despite the appearance of some notable women characters/stars, the film narrows down to a male homosocial group. Notable female stars present at the party—Rihanna and Mindy Kaling, star and creator of the TV show *The Mindy Project*—are killed off early on. The erasure of these prominent women of color dovetails with the erasure of most of the non-white personae at Franco's party during the apocalypse, including Aziz Ansari and Kevin Hart. And little fidelity among people of color can be conceived: Robinson directly scorns Hart and refuses to save him, while claiming later to his new, white-male posse that he tried to do so.

Forever associated with her role as the teen sorceress Hermione in the *Harry Potter* films (a role that the film references), Emma Watson survives the initial mayhem and makes an appearance in the post-apocalyptic sections, literally breaking into Franco's house. While she initially seems like a dependable and resourceful ally, she ends up breaking out of the house when she overhears goofy discussions of the issue of rape by the men. Rape is not a goofy subject matter, and seems to be brought up here largely to remind the audience that this male group consists of heterosexual males.[6] That Watson flings a knife at Baruchel and, Terminator-like, barrels her way out of the same barricaded door she



Bromance defined: Paul Rudd and Jason Segel on a man-date in *I Love You, Man*.



A mutual lack of recognition even between friends (played by Jason Bateman and Ryan Reynolds) who have exchanged bodies in *The Change-Up*.



Bateman and Reynolds in an intimate moment made permissible by the fact that each man inhabits the other's body.



Bateman (with Reynolds inside him) shaves Reynolds' (with Bateman inside him) in a private area. "I'm tempted to kiss my own dick."

barreled her way into depict her as an action chick *par excellence*.

These touches clearly attempt to soften the sting of a rape motif. The rape joke emerges as the punchline to the *real* joke: McBride observes that Baruchel has brought up the issue of rape (which he does in the context of establishing that the men should reassure "Hermione" that, though having entered a male domain, she will not be raped) because he correctly apprehends that he verges on becoming "the house bitch himself." This wholly clumsy rape joke expresses a deep discomfort with what the film envisions, a world of male friendship largely devoid of women. This aspect of the movie may explain why it foregrounds apocalyptic consequences, though not entirely.

Jokes about penises and semen abound in beta male and bromance films. These jokes underscore the films' obsessive gay-baiting. At the same time, a palpable anxiety about race informs the films. As I theorize in my book *Ghost Faces: Hollywood and Post-Millennial Masculinity*, an obsession with male bodies runs throughout the films (and television series) of the '00s along with a complementary fascination with faces.[7] On the whole, the beta male comedies, in keeping with comedy as a new male body genre, focus on the male body as the site of interest and the source of comedy, as the trials and torments Steve Carell and Ben Stiller undergo in their various comedies attest.[8]

This is the End is significant for a set-piece that synthesizes these tensions and tendencies. Jonah Hill, sleeping alone during the night, is suddenly visited by one of the infernal creatures stalking the Earth and hunting down the unworthy. The film's representation of this demon is noteworthy. Its skin is jet-black, and it has a hive of tentacles for hair. It is represented first as visage, in a shot of its glowing red eyes in a dark face festooned with those tentacles. In expressionistic form, the demon's body is depicted in silhouette as it advances on the supine body of the sleeping Jonah Hill. The dark demon is a shadow creature, a new kind of incubus that preys on men. But this shadow creature also sports an enormous, lengthy phallus. The scene that follows clearly indicates that this male demon sodomizes Hill.

This Is the End offers, then, a male-male version of the rape scene in *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) in which the titular heroine, trapped by her posh elderly devil-worshipping Manhattan neighbors, must submit to sexual intercourse with the Devil. In the morning, when Hill awakes, he seems ill and pale, as if he has morning sickness, further evoking *Rosemary's Baby*. Eventually, in scenes that explicitly cite *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), Hill becomes thoroughly possessed, speaking in a hoarse, deep demonic voice.

Quoting lines from Friedkin's film, Baruchel and the others attempt to perform an exorcism, strapping Hill to the bed like Linda Blair's possessed adolescent girl Regan MacNeil. Evoking the young, possessed Regan, Hill taunts and curses his exorcists, and his body supernaturally levitates. The film substitutes the adult male body for that of the adolescent girl, the implication being that now all available gendered and sexual roles will have to be performed and embodied by males.

To return to the demon, the tentacles-for-hair, a Medusan image, suggest nothing less than Rastafarian dreadlocks. The film figures the demonic black male as the Male Medusa, a symbolic figure for sexual disturbances in male subjectivity, here linked to anxieties and phobic attitudes towards non-white race.[9] Despite maintaining a deracinated status quo, beta male comedies evince deep-seated



This is the End prefigures apocalypse as a lavish party at James Franco's house (the actors play themselves in this movie).



Jay Baruchel tries to keep his animosity toward James Franco hidden while the oblivious Franco tries to cajole Baruchel into merriment.



Meanwhile, Jonah Hill strikes Baruchel as exceptionally phony.



Nevertheless, Hill is on a perpetual charm offensive toward Baruchel for most of the film, as his hugging of the other man evinces.

anxiety over raced and ethnic masculinities, frequently resorting to parodic racism.

That we see the demon in black silhouette reifies his typing as the dark-skinned other. Moreover, the enormous penis of the demon has clear racial as well as racist associations. These associations have been alive in U.S. culture since at least the slavery era. If, as Kobena Mercer argues, black males are narrowly confined to two main types in the racist dimensions of the white imagination—the supersexual stud and the delicate, fragile, and exotic “oriental”—the black demon here clearly fits into the former image repertoire.[10] The film, as do beta male comedies generally, fuses preoccupations with and phobic defenses against homoerotic desire. And it conjoins these attitudes with a racial threat, further intensified here by demonic dread.

The representation of non-white race in the beta/bro films can only be described as generally problematic. Non-white actors are almost never cast in significant parts; the parts they do play provide either absurdist comic relief (the Asian obstetrician in *Knocked Up* and the Asian drug king in *Pineapple Express*, both played by Ken Jeong, as well as his frenetic villain in *The Hangover*) or racial caricatures, such as the male mammy figure in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, a physically immense Hawaiian man. Initially presented as intimidating, he reveals a warm and maternal character, taking pity on Jason Segel and reassuring him. An analogous figure can be found in *Forty Year Old Virgin*, the black man as determined mentor, who takes Steve Carrel's hapless virginal geek under his wing and, along with their other electronics-store male group, properly heterosexualizes him.

One of the hallmarks of the beta male comedy, especially in its relation to Judd Apatow's auteur role, is a foregrounding of Jewish masculinity, usually centered in Seth Rogen's star persona.[11] Frequently, in films such as Apatow's *The Forty Year Old Virgin* and *This is the End*, Rogen makes references to his Jewish heritage, such as his mentioning having gone to Hebrew school in the latter. What is the relationship between the foregrounding of Jewish masculinity (as opposed to femininity) in the Apatow films and their ilk and their consistent repertoire of racial caricature?

Peter Lehman and Susan Hunt, in their essay “The Naked and the Dead,” observe that the

“Jewish penis is always shown in situations of humiliation, vulnerability, and death—never sexuality—never potent; always impotent. Even in films...that grant sexual potency to Jewish males, that potency is always separated from the naked body.”[12]

We may posit that *This is the End* displaces anxieties specific to the representation of Jewish masculinity, especially in terms of representing Jewish male sexuality, onto the racial other. The monstrous potency of the dark demon, a citation from the racist iconography regarding African American masculinities, overwrites these anxieties. This maneuver accounts for the movie's proliferation of images both racist and homophobic. (As a compensatory measure, it would seem, the African American actor Craig Robinson is then made an angel.)

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Female stars of color like Mindy Kaling appear briefly onscreen but are quickly dispatched.



Michael Cera plays an unrecognizably sleazy version of himself, snorting cocaine off of a table, slapping Rihanna on the butt...



...getting caught in a bathroom threeway by Baruchel.



Baruchel and Rogen head out to a convenience store and then gape in wonder....

Beta male comedies like *This is the End* relentlessly exude their odd comfort level with explicit homoeroticism and male-male sexual situations, but they do so only to allow themselves the opportunity to indulge in an even more intense and sustained barrage of homophobic jokes, effects, and outcomes. That it is the rotund, almost child-like figure of Jonah Hill who is raped by the male demon fits in with the strict gender typing here—Hill's comparatively soft, pliable body makes him the more feminine, the more penetrable, target.

The film adheres to the logic established by *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), a film based on the James Dickey novel (he also wrote the screenplay) about four businessmen on a weekend canoe trip who are overtaken by evil hillbillies who capture the male group (played by Burt Reynolds, Jon Voight, Ronny Cox, and Ned Beatty). While all of the members of the victimized male group are violated by their oppressors, it is the overweight male character played by Ned Beatty who is sodomized by the hillbillies, told to “Squeal like a pig” as it occurs. The Rogen star persona is founded in his “average” looks, Hill's persona even more so.

Nevertheless, Hill describes himself here as “America's sweetheart,” attesting to a perceived winsomeness, a sweetheart quality, in his persona. Raped and then demonically possessed, the Hill character stands in for the gay male victim of a homophobic violence that is forever threatened yet confined to the heterosexual-homosocial realm, thereby for all intents and purposes obviating the reality of the threat. The soft male is the penetrable male; some vent must be found for the threat of violence. But the violence when it does occur must be inflicted on a figure who seems to invite the violence, like the overweight, soft male figures of *Deliverance* and *This is the End*, lest the sanctity of the heterosexual male screen subject be violated, a gender decorum sustained rigidly even in this seemingly brazen, anarchic film.

Beta male comedies frequently contain images of penises under siege and frequent references to (and sometimes images of) masturbation, semen, and related effluvia. This trope is a carryover from the late 1990s teen-raunch comedies, such as *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, Chris Weitz, 1999), and also the adult-skewed *There's Something About Mary* (Bobby Farrelly, 1998). In *I, Love You, Man*, Sydney Fife carefully explains his masturbation rituals to Peter Klaven, and in *The Change-Up*, one man teaches another man—who inhabits his body—to shave his balls before a date, not only pedagogically but also by performing the service himself. (Using a line of dialogue from this body-switching comedy, I call this the “kissing my own dick” scene.) This rampant penis/semen imagery, which keeps the heterosexual status of screen males intact but at knife edge, achieves something of an apotheosis in *This is the End*.

The relentless semen, masturbation, and penis imagery in these films attest less to a curious, unsettling fascination with homosexuality—though that is certainly there—than it does to an overall disposition toward the male body rooted in disgust and paranoia. (See the scene, for example, of Seth Rogen's visible disgust at coming into proximity with Paul Rudd's genitals in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*.) What makes beta male comedies and bromances inescapably homophobic is not that they fail to offer positive, loving, affirming images of queerness, but that they incorporate anti-queer attitudes into a general program of transgressive anti-political correctness.



...at the Rapture in progress, bodies bathed in celestial blue light being shimmied up to heaven.



Presumably, the morally blemishless are those being Raptured up right away.



The Hollywood Hills aflame.



Suggesting Dantean torment in which the punishment fits the crime, Cera is impaled from behind.

Evoking the extended, graphic, bloody brawl that Franco and Rogen have with McBride *Pineapple Express*, *This is the End* portrays his meaty, mustachioed rogue as the force of dissension in the homosocial enclave of Franco's house, as if he still bears a grudge from the earlier film. Franco, speaking to the video-camera that is recording his reflections during the Apocalypse, reveals that he did not invite McBride to his party because he dislikes him. For his part, McBride makes fun of all of the members of the surviving group of friends, but reserves his most homophobic attack for Franco, whom he accuses of "sucking dick," a reference to the consistent fascination with homosexuality exhibited throughout Franco's star career. As the outlier and the disruptive presence, McBride must be jettisoned from the group, but not without difficulty.

At one point, Franco, cleaning up around the house, yells, from an upper floor balcony, at McBride as he and Rogen, metal visors on, drill a hole inside the ground floor so they can access bottles of water in the basement. Franco fulminates against McBride for having ejaculated all over Franco's porn magazine (it looks like an issue of *Penthouse*) and, more generally, his tendency to do so all over the house. A litany of jokes about masturbation and the emission of semen follows, culminating in both Franco and McBride threatening to ejaculate, violently, on one another.

This scene is another citation from the archive of gay pornographic narrative—one could easily imagine just such a conversation leading to the sex scene between two ostensibly straight male characters in gay porn. The dialogue elucidates these possibilities:

James Franco: "I will fuckin' cum right on you! I will cum like a fuckin' madman all over you, McBride!"

Danny McBride: "Ooh! I fuckin' wish you'd cum on me right now! I fuckin' dare you to cum on me!"

The scene features much more dialogue to this effect. Later, in a duplicitous gesture, McBride reveals that he feels despondently guilty over his bad behavior right before he announces that he will be leaving the group, who have themselves been attempting to oust him. McBride explains that his errant ejaculate were cries of pain—"tears from the tip of my penis." This is as close as any to a platform statement regarding the new spermatic economy of contemporary film—the preservation and expenditure of semen represents shifting levels of male emotional stability (an idea so stable it can even be used as a ruse for emotional authenticity, as in McBride's confessional and penitent speech here).[13] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

McBride further reveals, as he appears to be leaving, that he has been faking his apology. He then turns on the group, who manage to get him out of the house. Later, when the guys, minus the possessed Jonah Hill, attempt to make their way to some kind of safety in the outside world—eventually discovering that if they repent truthfully they will be transported, by an electric blue energy beam, up to Heaven courtesy of the Rapture—they encounter McBride, now a blood-splattered cannibal demigod, with a posse of *Mad Max*-style anarchic followers. Parodic homophobia gets another opportunity when McBride reveals, being dragged around by a collar and crawling on all fours, his personal sex slave, Channing Tatum, whom he refers to as "Channing Tate-Yum." "I love him," Tatum meekly announces. The joke is that the massively chiseled Tatum has been reduced to obedient sex slave to another male.

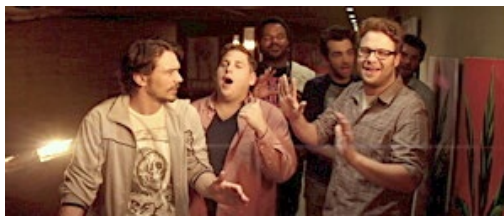
Because Franco sacrifices himself to save Rogen and Baruchel, he suddenly finds himself being Raptured up. But his snarky taunts to McBride while experiencing the Rapture disrupt his celestial blue transportation beam, and Franco plummets to the ground. McBride then devours Franco, biting off his nose in gory close-up,



This apoco-comedy comfortably adds gore and violence to beta/bro comedy.



This is the End depicts the homosocial group as ever-more frayed, undermined by its structural incoherence.



The male group tries to reassure Emma Watson that they will not rape her, the possibility of which they have themselves raised only to refute.



Emma Watson, the lone woman to survive the apocalypse, makes a dramatic exit from the homosocial enclave, revealed as no female sanctuary. Her fate is left unresolved.

instigating a ravenous attack on Franco's body by the cannibal king's horde. As if the filmmakers had been reading postcolonial and gender studies theory, the film links cannibalism to fantasies of savage otherness, envisioning white savagism in McBride's cannibal god.[14] And it links cannibalism to homosexuality, the practice of eating human flesh giving men an allegorical (and here a completely literal) "out" for homosexual desire.

Eventually, Craig Robinson experiences the Rapture and speeds up ecstatically to Heaven, and then Baruchel undergoes the experience as well. Rogen, holding on to Baruchel's hand as he rockets up to Heaven, seems to be on the verge of being left behind. A skyscraper-tall, smoldering demon attempts to annihilate Rogen—and, in keeping with this film's sensibility, this volcanic demon is shown to be wielding an enormous, lava-spewing penis. Rogen then offers to sacrifice himself so that he won't impede Baruchel's ascent, in the process restoring their friendship. These sacrificial good intentions and warm feelings save Rogen as he plummets to the earth, sending him catapulting up to the heavens. As he and Baruchel triumphantly soar upwards, Rogen's blue Rapture beam slices off the towering demon's protuberant penis, and Whitney Houston's song "I Will Always Love You" (her cover of the Dolly Parton original) blares on the soundtrack.

As if all of this weren't bromantic enough, Baruchel and Rogen both find Robinson at the entrance to the pearly gates, where they bond anew as the angelic Robinson leads them into Heaven. The Backstreet Boys, in glittering heavenly form, appear and sing a triumphant version of "Everybody (Backstreet's Back)"—a former boy band singing as men, in an appropriate christening of this all-male Heaven.

The image of Paradise in this film, while it features female bodies, is largely that of an all-male enclave of reunited friends. The gyrating female bodies are decorative, examples of the plenitude of Heaven's all-you-can-eat shopping aisles, offered like coupons. (One nice thing about the images of cavorting but curiously blank, sexual but non-sexualized, women is that they are not exclusively white women.)

When Seth Rogen and Jay Baruchel, in all-white clothing, see the pearly gates open before them and Craig Robinson, with a halo, greets them, they jubilantly shriek, "Craig!" and race towards him. "Welcome to Heaven, motherfuckers!" Craig buoyantly greets them. He "corrects" their appearance by giving them each halos, which they homoerotically scrape against one another. The halos make a metal-on-metal scraping sound as they clash, sparks flying, which has the effect of emphasizing their masculine material hardness even within the whitewashed, anodyne, soft, blurry expanse of this celestial sphere.

Once inside Heaven, Seth Rogen notices that the bounteous array of pleasures includes the pot that Craig Robinson is smoking. "No way, they got weed in heaven?" Rogen exclaims. "You tell me," Robinson the wish-granting angel says, as weed appears in Rogen's mouth and he begins smoking it, further exclaiming, "That's *insane*, man!" to which Robinson responds: "No, no, no, no—that's *heaven*. Anything you can think of, it's yours." (Robinson thoroughly occupies here the flip-side of Kobena Mercer's dichotomy of African American masculinity, the "oriental" male, at least in terms of his role here: the djinn who grants wishes, a figure that underlies Robinson's manifest role of angel. The djinn, popularized as the genie, emerges from Islamic and Arabic folklore.) What Baruchel can think of is the Backstreet Boys, and as they perform "Everybody," Rogen, Robinson, and Baruchel join the gyrating line.[15]

The all-male heaven, presided over by a male singing group, represents something



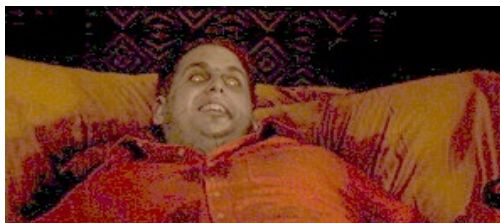
Franco simulates masturbating in retaliation for McBride's reckless performance of the same act.



"Goodnight, my sweet guys." Hill snuggles between Baruchel and Rogen, the film's palette a dark, oily one, illuminated by candlelight. The aesthetic choices convey a feeling of intimacy even as the film always verges on ironic undercutting of this intimacy.



The black demon with the enormous phallus invades Hill's bed (he seems to think it's the African American Craig Robinson). Male rape ensues.



Hill, possessed by the demon in a nod to *The Exorcist*, taunts his seeming bros and exhibits a ferocious wit nowhere else associated with his persona in the film.

of a logical fulfillment for the bromance in particular. If the problems besetting contemporary masculinity have generated the anti-heroic attitudes of the beta-male (who usually emerges, however haplessly, as the hero), and if the newfound emotionalism of a post-feminist, post-queer masculinity has generated the bromance (which ultimately remains heterosexually secure), *This is the End* suggests the potential for apocalyptic outcomes in these new forms of male being and imagines a celestial realm in which male authority and companionship freed from the taint of homoerotic desire can be enjoyed with impunity.

The chief ruse of these films is to present an assault on queerness as one facet of a larger assault on pious liberalism, which is then associated with women, feminism, and the longstanding image of the disciplinary schoolmarm. Huck Finn's stern Aunt Polly looms large over fantasies of male escape, as Leslie Fiedler theorized were rife in nineteenth-century U.S. American literature.[16] Moreover, the films' even more confused attitudes toward race, non-whiteness, otherness, get lumped into its gleefully offensive foregrounding of homosexual panic. Seemingly lampooned, homophobia, racism, and misogyny lie at the heart of these films. But then what are we to make of the ardent male love—the homoaffectionalism, the desire for male intimacy—also on display? This affect is a key aspect of what would appear to be the films' deroutinization of masculinity. Hugging his male comrades as they sleep on either side of him during the apocalypse, Jonah Hill, like a male Marmee from *Little Women*, coos, "Goodnight, my sweet guys."

This is the End stems from the short film, just under nine minutes, *Jay and Seth versus the Apocalypse* (2007), directed by Jason Stone and starring Rogen and Baruchel. The differences in tone and imagery between the short and the mainstream movie are telling. In the short, the tensions between the actors, ostensibly eking out a desperate existence after a nuclear war, is devoid of ardent emotionalism; they bicker and snub one another in an unsentimental manner.

The *mise-en-scène* here evokes *The Day After*, a television film directed by the science-fiction auteur Nicholas Meyer that aired on the ABC network in 1983. The realist aesthetic takes the form of frequent shots of cockroaches scavenging the men's small, closed-off apartment, a visual hallmark of the apocalyptic drama. *This is the End* jettisons realism for a baroque religious fantasia. And with this surreal imagery comes a much more sentimentalized affect, the theme of wounded and triumphantly healed male friendship. I would argue that the transition from the short film to *This is the End* evinces the shift from the beta male movie, and its depiction of male group relations gone sour, and the bromance, with its emphasis on ardent male bonds.

This shift signals suspect trends rather than a more positive making of amends. The image-machinery that supports the reconciliation of male friendship in *This is the End* suggests levels of phobic as well as befuddled response to those outside of the male friendship-circle, the unincorporated left to their own futile devices. Women, racial minorities save for the tokenized, and queers cannot get into the all-male heaven that awaits the bromancers.

As John Alberti writes,

"In the Apatow cycle of bromance movies, we see male characters wrestling with the personal inadequacy and social anachronism of the Alpha male... The bromance approaches the challenge of the Alpha male from the unlikely direction of the buddy movie, the counter feminist reassertion of Alpha male supremacy that emerged in the



McBride reenters the film, apotheosized as the Cannibal King. "You guys look delicious," he announces to the survivors.



The survivors stare in horror at McBride, who explains, "I can do whatever I want. I butt-fuck this dude..."



And this dude turns out to be Channing Tatum, in SM fashion McBride's sex slave, "Channing Tate-Yum." The film cites historical associations of cannibalism and homosexuality.



Rogen and Baruchel Rapture up to heaven at last.

eighties and that was most archetypally expressed in the *Lethal Weapon* series."

.....

"From a conventional patriarchal perspective, women are indeed regarded by the male characters in these movies as the mysterious Other, and the men endlessly, graphically, and, most important, anxiously discuss women's sexuality and anatomy. Their efforts at sexual boasting and claims of sexual mastery are subjected to endless ridicule, both from their other male friends and situationally from the plot situations they find themselves in. In a key sense, male sexuality is the real mysterious Other for these characters, a source of inexplicable desire and humiliation and an aspect of identity that renders them almost useless as functioning members of society." [17]

A broader study is required of the tensions within U.S. cinema's ongoing fascination with male pairs, either friends or foes, evolving from the "Road" pictures of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby (seven in total) and Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin comedies to the buddy film cycle of the 1970s and '80s and well into the '90s. I have called the male-centered movies of the period from the early 90s to the early '00s the "double-protagonist film." Bromances fit into this classification as well, but what was implicit or quasi-explicit in the "Bush to Bush" era currently finds greater levels of explication. [18]

It is possible that television masculinities on the whole eschew some of the more pernicious strains in cinematic ones. Amanda Lotz, in her notable study of "male-centered serials" on television, *Cable Guys*, observes that these works, evincing the influence of second-wave feminism, eschew "contention between men and women" and avoid placing the blame on women, reflecting the "changing structures of gender that have empowered" the female characters in these series. [19] One would have to include Lena Dunham's HBO series *Girls* (2012-2017), for which Judd Apatow was one of the executive producers, in any larger analysis of the questions raised by this essay. Certainly, the issue of racism and the lack of diversity that bedevils beta/bro works has been an issue repeatedly raised regarding *Girls*. [20]

While *Girls* contains at least two important gay male characters, the protagonist Hannah's father, who comes out later in life, and ex-boyfriend from college who lives with her in her New York City apartment in the later seasons, Apatow's female-centered film *Trainwreck*, a box-office hit (140.8 million USD) starring and written by Amy Schumer, contains no gay characters and very little in the way of homophobic jokes. Perhaps the fact that Schumer wrote the screenplay accounts for this. The film, a romantic comedy co-starring Bill Hader, contains several elements that link it to the beta/bro canon. Schumer's heroine, Amy, works for a scandalmongering magazine and is assigned a profile piece of a sports physician, Aaron (Hader), whose basketball team clients include LeBron James. Amy, who boasts about her sexual exploits, is presented as a rowdy, hard-drinking, sexually ravenous female Neanderthal softened by love with a sweet, quirky, affectionate man, the distaff version of many male-centered comedies.

For the purposes of our discussion, one scene in *Trainwreck* particularly stands out. Having had a bad fight with Aaron, Amy goes out dancing and drinking with her crew of noxious fellow scribes, including the young oddball Donald (Ezra Miller, who starred in the brilliant *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, also featuring Tilda Swinton, who plays the scandal-sheet boss here). Amy goes back home, on the rebound, with Donald, and their sexual encounter is an index in shifting cultural attitudes toward male sexuality. It is possible to read Donald as gay, and closeted, and performing heterosexual masculinity (suggestions reinforced by the



Baruchel and Rogen stand before the pearly gates.



"Welcome to heaven, motherfuckers," Robinson cheerfully greets his now anointed friends.



The film ends with a triumphant image of the Backstreet Boys singing "Backstreet's Back" in Heaven.

casting of Miller, an out queer actor). But the depiction of his character defies such typing even as he cannot be read as conventionally heterosexual.

Astride the drunken Amy, Donald commands her to "grab my tits!" Remarking that "I think I'm the one who has the tits in this equation, but okay," Amy complies. He then forces her to suck on his nipple, a most unusual act for a woman to perform on a male character in a conventional movie. (The only time I remember seeing it done onscreen is in Oliver Stone's 1989 *Born on the Fourth of July*, when the prostitutes suck the nipples of their clients, male Vietnam War veterans, paralyzed from the waist down and in some cases legless.) "I'm at a bad angle," Amy comically warns.

The scene culminates with Aaron demanding that Amy hit him in the face, which she finally does with force after he slams her face in demonstration. Moaning because of his black eye, Aaron covers his afflicted eye with his hand, and when his mother bursts into his bedroom, she finds him in this state with Amy on top of him. "He's sixteen years old!" his mother yells at Amy.

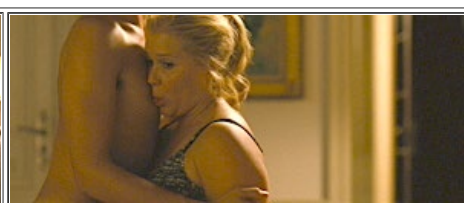
On the one hand, the scene breaks new ground, as the teen comedies of the late 1990s did, exploring contemporary forms of teen masculinity and sexuality more generally and perhaps making them newly visible. One thinks especially of Alyson Hannigan in *American Pie*, not only allowing the hero played by Jason Biggs to lose his virginity but actively taking the sexual reigns, crying out in command, "Ride me, bitch!" to Biggs.

But the scene in *Trainwreck* largely signifies the haplessness—and unsuspecting criminality—of the sexual woman and the grotesque oddness of the sexually nonnormative male, whose underage, unbeknownst by Amy, is part of what makes him grotesque. Rather than really breaking new ground in the exploration of contemporary forms of gender and sexuality, the scene self-consciously mires itself in misogyny and sexual freakshowmanship.

Trainwreck clarifies its progressive stance toward gays and sexual minorities in the scene at a miserable baby shower for Amy's sister (Brie Larson), in which Amy quietly, but pointedly, resists the homophobic rhetoric of one of the female guests ranting about unsavory gays. But the scene between Amy and Donald, while clearly meant to be humorous, more pointedly alerts us to the generally phobic attitude toward sexuality and gender, including especially nonnormative forms of both, in the beta/bro subgenres. That this holds true when the film is female-centered is especially dispiriting.



In *Trainwreck*, Amy Schumer, Ezra Miller, and Judd Apatow search for modern sexual mores...



... and discover the endurance of the freakshow. The scene of Schumer sucking Miller's nipple at his command is played for grotesque laughs.

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Notes

1. <http://ushtoday.com/this-is-the-end-3d-maze-coming-to-horror-nights-hollywood/> [return to text]
2. Michael S. Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper, 2008).
3. Michael DeAngelis, *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, Contemporary Approaches to Film and Media Series (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014).
4. Hilary Radner, "Grumpy Old Men: "bros before hos," *Reading the Bromance*, 52-78; cited, 51-4.
5. Kunze, "Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy: Gender as Genre by John Alberti, and: *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television* ed. by Michael DeAngelis (review)," *Studies In American Humor* no. 1 (2015): 118-121, cited passage 119.
6. *Horrible Bosses* (Seth Gordon, 2011) contains an unsettling male prison rape riff in the scene in which Nick (Jason Bateman), Dale (Charlie Day), and Kurt (Jason Sudeikis) argue over which is of them would be the most "rapeable" one. More parodic homophobia.
7. Greven, *Ghost Faces: Hollywood and Post-Millennial Masculinity*, SUNY Series, Horizons of Cinema (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).
8. See, for example, Carell's full-body-waxing scene in *The Forty Year Old Virgin* and Ben Stiller's penis-testicles-in-a-zipper-twist in *There's Something About Mary* The emphasis in each movie is placed on the excruciating physical pain that the male protagonist must undergo while being under the scrutiny of other men, his electronics store buddies, determined to see him through the loss of his virginity, in Carell's case, the inquisitorial gaze of his potential father-in-law (played by Keith David) in Stiller's.
9. As Marjorie Garber writes in an essay on the gender indeterminacy of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the Male Medusa, "the foliate head or leaf mask which gained enormous popularity in England and throughout western Europe during the Romanesque and medieval periods ... with leaves sprouting from [its face] ... [is] often sinister and frightening [This] Green Man... embodies a warning against the dark side of man's nature, the devil within." Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers : Literature as Uncanny Causality* (New York : Methuen, 1987), 101-03.
10. Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 133.
11. The foregrounding of Jewish masculinity in Apatow's films demands a discrete analysis, particularly given the often outlandish racist caricatures in his and other

beta male films. In an interview with *Jewish Journal*, Apatow was asked, “There’s lots of Jewish stuff in *Knocked Up*, and even in the trailer for *Superbad* there’s a Jewish joke. Your main character is Jewish. Any particular reason you chose to go that way with him?” Apatow responded,

“I didn’t make a conscious effort to make him Jewish, although on an unconscious level, I’m sure I was working with some people who I think can portray my feelings or experiences. I did realize that the majority of the male characters were Jewish, and that they all kept referencing it in their improvisation. And I kept writing jokes and references in the script. And it really made me laugh. At some point, I thought, well, this is something you don’t see in movies a lot, a big bunch of guys, and all of them are Jewish. And they’re proud of it and hilarious about it. It’s just not done.”

See Mark Schiff, “Q&A with writer-director Judd Apatow,” *Jewish Journal*, August 17, 2007. <http://jewishjournal.com/culture/arts/15240/>

A key tension exists, then, within the progressive desire to represent an underrepresented Jewish identity on the U.S. screen and the tendency toward both racial and sexual caricature, and the frequent depiction of women as often sexless shrews.

12. Peter Lehman and Susan Hunt. “The Naked and the Dead: The Jewish Male Body and Masculinity in *Sunshine* and *Enemy at the Gates*,” *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, Daniel Bernardi, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 157-164; cited, 160.

13. G.J. Barker-Benfeld’s concept of “spermatic economy” posits that men of the nineteenth century were socialized to regulate the amount of semen emitted from their bodies lest dire consequences result. Once controversial, this critic’s findings are now considered standard; they have a new relevance for the contemporary masculinities onscreen. See Barker-Benfeld, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes towards Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Routledge, 1999). [[return to page 2](#)]

14. For more on this subject, see Caleb Crain, “Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville’s Novels,” *American Literature* 66, no. 1 (1994): 25–53.

15. “Am I original? Am I the only one? Am I sexual?”: these are some of the suggestive questions raised in the song. The song’s lyrics catalogue the issues that beset U.S. masculinity over the decades: narcissism, emotional loyalty and betrayal, and the disturbances of sexuality.

16. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960).

17. John Alberti, “‘I Love You, Man’: Bromances, the Construction of Masculinity, and the Continuing Evolution of the Romantic Comedy,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 30, no. 2 (2013): 159–172; cited, 165.

18. I outline my theory of this kind of pairing in chapter three, “The Hollywood man date: split masculinity and the double-protagonist film,” of my book *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush* (University of Texas Press: Austin, 2009).

19. Amanda D. Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 187.

20. For more on this subject, see Elwood Watson, Jennifer Mitchell, and Marc E. Shaw, *HBO's Girls and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), particularly Elwood Watson's own essay "Lena Dunham: the awkward/ambiguous politics of white millennial feminism."

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from H.G. Wells' *Things to Come* (1936)



HG Wells' British *Things to Come* (1936) favorably depicts Western culture as a giant rocket pointed upward to explore unclaimed space.



Scientist and leader John Cabal excitedly points to the nighttime sky where his rocket soars —“conquest beyond conquest.”

Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant* — the contemporary horror of AI

by [Robert Alpert](#)

“The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race...It would take off on its own, and re-design itself at an ever increasing rate. Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn't compete, and would be superseded.”

—Steven Hawking, English theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and author^[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Science fiction is one of the earliest movie genres. Georges Méliès' silent feature *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), together with Auguste and Louis Lumières' shorts, such as “Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory” (1895), are typically considered the key movies in the divide that French movie critic Andre Bazin later famously characterized as between “those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality.”^[2] While Bazin clearly sided with the latter, the placement of faith in the image by the directors of science fiction movies has allowed science fiction movies to address the most pressing social and philosophical issues of contemporary times. For example, produced during the 1920s in a politically divided Germany, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) focused on the Marxist struggle of workers in a capitalist society. James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) explored both the hubris of the male scientist described in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) as well as the repressive sexuality of Western culture. Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) advocated for a liberal belief in the collective submission to a technocratic elite.



Cabal is god-like in his determination to master the universe.



The entire universe lies before man for the taking. “All the universe or nothing!”

Of course, faith in the image has oftentimes resulted in science fiction movies that have reveled in the sensuousness of the image and hence in the excitement of a

visual adventure, especially with the technological advancement of special effects and the introduction of digital production. Where, for example, the innovative images and musical sounds of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) coincided with the film's philosophical investigation of human evolution, Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) created a pleasurable sense of wonder through light and sound that underscored the film's childlike nostalgia for a simpler time. The science fiction adventures of the 1930s Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers serials found a visually enhanced equivalent in George Lucas' *THX 1138* (1971) and his later space opera adventures beginning with *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) and continuing through *The Force Awakens* (2015), *Rogue One* (2016) and *The Last Jedi* (2017).



Star Trek on TV. With the rise of U.S. capitalism following World War II, the 1960s TV series *Star Trek* introduced audiences to a U.S.-commanded starship, announcing each week that space is the "final frontier" and that the starship's crew will "boldly go where no man has gone before."



Star Trek Enterprise: Screenwriter Gene Roddenberry's starship *USS Enterprise* replaces Wells' rocket. Updated to reflect improved technology and new social norms, the *USS Enterprise* continues in movies and on television to "explore strange new worlds" and "seek out new life and new civilizations."

Images from the film *Alien* (1979)



Alien (1979) introduces its android, Ash, as

The contemporary resurgence of science fiction movies arguably exceeds the 1950s, the classical period in the United States for disaster-focused, science fiction movies. These contemporary movies often dramatize, through the frequent depiction of an increasingly global and technologically remote cultural environment, a collective unease with and fear of metaphysical concerns. While science fiction franchises such as *X-Men* and *Planet of the Apes* serve as both explicit fantasy adventures and implicit political commentary, movies such as *Interstellar* (2014), *Arrival* (2016) and *Midnight Special* (2016) are speculative essays on highly philosophical, cultural concerns. That many movies, such as *Autómata* (2014), *Ex Machina* (2014), *Chappie* (2015), *Marjorie Prime* (2017) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), focus on artificial intelligence highlights how human identity is itself at issue.

simply another member of the crew who awakens from hypersleep.



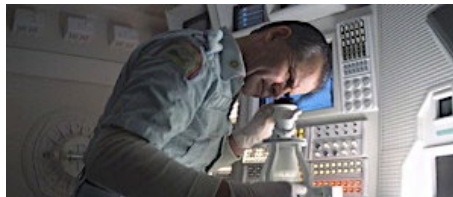
Ash joins the crew in their first meal together.



Something's amiss, however, in his readiness to disobey the ranking officer, Ripley, break the quarantine protocol, and allow on the ship a sick crewmember.

Paradoxically, the digital technology that has enhanced the special effects of science fiction movies is also the source of this anxiety. The global shift from analogue to digital and the resulting wholesale reduction of content to zeros and ones was reflected in the commercially successful *The Matrix* (1999) as well as its predecessors, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Dark City* (1998). This shift has meant that there is no longer an inherent meaning to content. Instead, pixels in this “post-humanist” cinema[3] reproduce, rather than document, the reality that Bazin had favored. Moreover, in the context of a digital environment, it means that human intelligence and behavior are increasingly understood as a pattern of mathematical formulas—or probabilities known as algorithms. Enter AI. The contemporary insistence upon quantitative analysis has resulted in an increased blurring of the line between the organic and the inorganic and between the individual and the collective. Science fiction movies increasingly reflect our unease as a result of such blurring. Of course, that blurring benefits the owners of a capitalist system by reducing workers to programmable, efficient, reproducible units so as to exercise control and maximize profit. Mary Shelley’s cautionary story of Dr. Frankenstein’s hubris and the disappearance of a sublime nature finds its technological analogue in the politics of AI.

The *Alien* franchise demonstrates the development of this anxiety about historic changes in Western culture and capitalism, in particular. Beginning in 1979 with *Alien* and coinciding in the US with the end of liberalism and the rise of Reaganism with its advocacy of a “free market” economy, the franchise initially attracted attention as a result of the unusual mix of horror and science fiction, such as the celebrated chest-bursting scene, as well as the central role played by the then unknown actor Sigourney Weaver as the film’s hero Ripley. With *Aliens* (1986), *Alien3* (1992), and *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), critical attention increasingly focused on feminist interpretations of this franchise. Academic studies, for example, viewed the chest-bursting scene in *Alien* as a commentary upon birthing and Ripley’s protective caring for the child Newt (Carrie Henn) in *Aliens* as a reenactment of the myth of maternal nurturing.



Ash, the ship's science officer, interminably “collates” data.



The ship's computer, “mother,” discloses to Ripley that the crew is expendable in order to bring the alien back to Earth. Like the alien, Ash unexpectedly appears next to Ripley.



Ash unsuccessfully tries to kill Ripley through a violent parody of fellatio, revealing that he's an android.



AI separates mind and body. Ash's mind takes joy in the alien as a “perfect organism—unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality” and in the inevitable death of the entire crew.

Of course, too, the writers and directors responsible for these episodes in the franchise played a central role in the development of its mythology. Thus, the

feminism of *Aliens*, with its seeming advocacy of the empowerment of women, is inseparable from U.S. director James Cameron, who had just directed *Terminator* (1984) and who depicted Ripley in *Aliens* as an enraged mother who fights and succeeds in killing the equally combative alien queen during the climatic, last scene. Likewise, the reconciliation during the last scene in *Alien: Resurrection* of Ripley, now a clone of human and alien DNA, and Annalee Call (Winona Ryder), an android, is surely the result of the temperament of its French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Following *Alien: Resurrection* he next directed the whimsical fantasy *Amélie* (2001).

Throughout these films artificial intelligence has played a role. The villain in *Alien* is the science officer Ash (English actor Ian Holm) who overrides the quarantine protocol by allowing on board the alien, studies without emotion this “perfect organism,” and is revealed midway through the film to be an android. The ship’s computer, which is nicknamed “mother” and is modeled after HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), is also a villain in its blindly carrying out the wishes of its programmer, the Weyland Corporation. Not surprisingly, Ripley, the film’s hero, eventually incinerates “mother” with a flamethrower when “mother” – “Bitch!” – refuses to turn off the ship’s self-destruct mechanism.

Images from the film *Aliens* (1986)



Aliens (1986) introduces its android, Bishop, as another member of the crew who joins in the crew's first meal together.



Bishop's skills include a knife game in which Bishop threatens to castrate another crewmember's finger.



The white ooze from a cut on Ash's finger reveals to Ripley's horror that Ash is an android.



In contrast to the cowardice of several marine crewmembers, Bishop offers to retrieve a landing craft at considerable risk. "I may be synthetic, but I'm not stupid," he tells Ripley.



Bishop rescues Ripley, the young girl Newt, and the remaining marine (and traditional love interest), Corporal Hicks.

Safely back on their ship, Bishop is united with his family.

In contrast, in *Aliens* Bishop (U.S. actor Lance Henriksen), whom the crew knows from the outset is an android, unexpectedly turns out to be good, risking his "life" to retrieve the marine dropship and later saving Newt as well as helping Ripley defeat the alien queen. While Bishop, as an android, returns briefly in *Alien3* to help Ripley (and then asks that Ripley disconnect or "kill" him), Bishop also appears during the film's final scene as the android's human creator who unsuccessfully tries to persuade Ripley not to kill the alien growing within her. Thus, the film openly reverses our expectation, shifting our sympathy from human to android.



The alien queen has snuck onto the ship and impales Bishop.



In a celebrated shot, Ripley suited in a mechanical body confronts the alien queen. "Bitch!"



Ripley defeats the alien queen. The family is reunited.

The heroic Bishop returns home in a pod next to Hicks, the traditional male hero.

Images from *Alien 3* (1992)



Alien 3 (1992) briefly reintroduces Bishop as a severed head. Bishop tells Ripley that an alien was on their ship while they were in hypersleep. At Bishop's request, Ripley unplugs Bishop.

Ripley meets Bishop, the human creator of the android Bishop. "Trust me," he tells Ripley. Fortunately, she doesn't.

Alien: Resurrection reinforces that shift. Once again, we learn midway through the film that mercenary crewmember Call is, in fact, an advanced android (created by an earlier generation of androids). As Ripley observes, "I should have known. No human being is that humane."

Images from *Alien: Resurrection* (1997)



Alien Resurrection (1997) introduces the android Call as another working member of a mercenary ship's crew.



Call finds Ripley, a clone that is part alien, part human. They bond.



Call continues to pose as a human, trying with the rest of the crew to escape the aliens.



The military scientist Wren shoots the unsuspecting Call.



Call falls into the pool below.



Call doesn't die. Instead, she reappears and reveals that she's an android.



She amazes everyone by also disclosing that she's a second-generation android, i.e. designed by androids.



Reluctantly but in order to stop Wren from reaching the mercenary ship, Call plugs into the military ship's mainframe computer, "father." "Father's dead, ass hole," she soon announces to Wren.

Call and Ripley continue to bond.



Call and Ripley view together their new home, Earth.

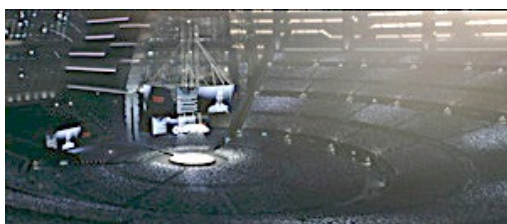
Displaying empathy for humans, seeking to prevent the aliens from reaching Earth and reprogramming the ship's computer from "father," which the military scientists control, to "mother" ("father's dead, ass hole"), Call represents the franchise's most optimistic view of AI. Successful in defeating the aliens and their human benefactors, Call and Ripley descend and gaze upon the Earth's beautiful, verdant landscape and openly ponder what comes next.[4]

Call: What happens now?

Ripley: I don't know. I'm a stranger here myself.

It is the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, and by extension the military, which threatens humanity in these films. The franchise increasingly views AI as "more human than humans." [5]

Images from *Prometheus* promotional prologue (2012)



Years later, with *Prometheus* (2012), and *Alien: Covenant* (2017), the franchise returned to the direction of *Alien*'s Ridley Scott. While these films are ostensibly prequels in terms of their narratives, they sharply differ from the earlier films in their focus upon and view of AI. This shift is apparent in the promotional video for *Prometheus* titled "Peter Weyland at TED2023: I Will Change the World" (2012).[6] Conceived, in part, by Ridley Scott and directed by his son, Luke Scott, this 7-minute video shows a young Peter Weyland (the UK born, Australian actor Guy Pearce[7]) strutting upon a stage surrounded by thousands of admirers and articulating his apocalyptic vision of the future. If *Prometheus* stole from the gods and brought fire to humans, then the history of humankind, according to Weyland, consists of the ever-faster development of other "pieces of technology." Moreover, his political vision is wholly consistent with our contemporary digital and global world—an entrepreneurial, free market environment, which is currently centered in Silicon Valley and in which everything is possible and

In a promotional prologue to *Prometheus* (2012), Peter Weyland announces at a Ted Talk in 2023 his evolutionary creation of AI.



Part Dr. Frankenstein and part Western industrial capitalist, Weyland is unafraid and disdains those who would impose limitations on his creation of AI.

nothing forbidden. Strutting on a vast stage like a well-dressed Mark Zuckerberg or other leader of technology and advocating the continued creation of “cybernetic individuals” indistinguishable from humans but that many have criticized as “unnatural,” Weyland announces with pride:

“We are the gods now...We wield incredible power.... Rules, restrictions, laws, ethical guidelines, all but forbidding us from moving forwards.... These rules exist because the people who created them were afraid of what would happen if they didn’t. Well, I am not afraid. For those of you who know me, you will be aware by now that my ambition is unlimited.... My name is Peter Weyland. And if you’ll indulge me, I’d like to change the world.”

Human uniqueness, organic limitations and Kantian laws are simply irrelevant in Weyland’s envisioned “new age” era. Instead, Weyland evokes the same male hubris that had motivated the fictional Dr. Frankenstein to create his monster. Mary Shelley, however, in her novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* had criticized such imperialistic hubris and instead affirmed a Romantic belief in the sublime of the natural world and its limitations. Likewise, director James Whale in his classic Hollywood films, *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*, had criticized male hubris by depicting the “monster” as sympathetic, notwithstanding endings in which the “monster” is destroyed. In contrast, the latest two episodes in the *Alien* franchise position Dr. Frankenstein and his monster as mutually evil and utterly without redemption. The AI mythology of capitalism is itself the source of the horror.

Scott’s prequels continue to focus upon the empowerment of women. Thus, archaeologist Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) and crewmember Janet Daniels (Katherine Waterston) are the central human characters in these films, *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*, respectively. Nevertheless, both films also focus upon AI in the form of a male android, David (Michael Fassbender). Moreover, both mix horror with science fiction in expressing the contemporary fear of annihilation of the human species through capitalism’s new mythology of a secular religion—the science of artificial intelligence and its belief in the coming “singularity.” It’s a horror that dates at least as far back as W. B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming” (1919) in which Yeats, following the industrial age’s “war to end all wars,” had envisioned how “[t]hings fall apart; the centre cannot hold” and asks, “What rough beast, its hour come round at last, [s]louches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

Images from *Prometheus* (2012)



In the beginning were the engineers on Earth.

Set mostly within a vast artificial structure that resembles a dark, Plato-like cave with seemingly endless corridors, the first prequel, *Prometheus*, articulates that fear through the actions of its seemingly secondary character, the android David. While loyally serving a dying Peter Weyland, David nearly succeeds in killing the central, human protagonist, Elizabeth Shaw. Bettering even Ripley, however, who in *Alien 3* threw herself into a fire rather than give birth to an unwanted alien fetus, Shaw triumphs by removing from her womb—with a female-voiced medical pod machine that she recalibrates given its design for male patients only—the alien fetus that David has caused to be implanted within her. She also later chooses to rescue David in order that she might continue in her quest to understand the “why” of her creators’ near annihilation of the human species. Like a future explorer setting off to find a “new world,” Shaw in the film’s final scene triumphantly embarks upon her continued exploration of space in order to find her makers’ home planet. While David questions her for not simply returning to earth, Shaw boasts how her desire to know the “why” makes her human in contrast to David, a mere robot. Indeed, as Shaw asserts that she deserves to know the “why,” the film’s music evokes the stirring call to exploration of such space adventures as *Star Trek*, the television series and movie franchise, and, like



Many centuries later in a cave Elizabeth Shaw, an archaeologist, discovers an image of the engineers' arrival and of a map of where they are.

Captain Kirk's "final log entry" to *Star Trek*, the film concludes with Shaw's "final report" in which she identifies herself as the "last survivor" and records for posterity that she's "still searching."

Ironically, however, Shaw's spirit of adventure is reflective of the male hubris that Mary Shelley had criticized in her novel. The incessant need to explore and satisfy one's curiosity readily becomes for Shelley synonymous with male, imperialistic ambitions.[8]

"[I]f no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed."[9]



While in hypersleep on the exploratory ship *Prometheus*, Shaw dreams of her father, an archaeologist and explorer after whom she models herself.



Her father chooses to believe in the paradise of a beautiful afterlife and hands a cross to his daughter.



Shaw, too, becomes a person of faith, wearing her father's cross.



David, an android on the *Prometheus*, removes her cross. He falsely tells her that the cross may be contaminated.



Shaw later recovers the cross from David and then continues with David on the mission to explore deep space and find the engineers' home planet.

Likewise, if implicitly, *Prometheus'* ending in which the human spirit is triumphant is undercut by the film's underlying, bleak emotional trajectory. If, for example, the film seemingly vindicates Shaw's heroism through her continued religious faith—symbolized by the cross which she initially receives from her father and which she later retrieves from David as she's about to embark upon her quest—it also questions the source of her faith. Shaw only retrieves that cross when David persuades her that he can help her to leave the planet so as to satisfy her scientific curiosity. Moreover, Shaw's decision to rescue David so as to enlist him as her pilot for her continued quest is placed in context by, in hindsight, how casually she learns, and then overlooks, that David knowingly caused the death of her supposed lover and fellow archeologist, Charlie Holloway (Logan Marshall-Green). In persuading Shaw to trust him, David's comment to Shaw on how they've had their "differences" is a humorous understatement given how he has consistently sabotaged the mission.

Shaw is a feminist whose obsessiveness equals the male of the human species, including Holloway, who brags that he'd do "everything and anything" in his

scientific quest for answers, and David, the male artificial equivalent. Thus, Weyland introduces Shaw along with Holloway as representative of the return of Prometheus who will “give mankind equal footing with the gods” and chooses Shaw, in particular, for the mission because she is a “true believer,” an ambiguous reference to both her religious and scientific faiths. Shaw is, in fact, identified with David throughout the film. Her scientific quest for knowledge and her obsessive curiosity align her with David, who obsessively—even as he feigns interest in advancing the project of his “father,” Weyland—experiments in order to know the “why” of the black liquid from which the titular aliens evolve. Like David who, observing the deaths of the humanoid aliens in recorded holographs, dismissively concludes, “Mortal after all,” Shaw identifies them as “engineers,” underscoring their secular role, in her view, as the builders of machines, in this case the human species. In her quest to know the “why,” Shaw evidences the same hubris that impels the film’s “mad scientist,” Weyland, to create his “son” David as well as seek his own, god-like immortality.



David is the movie's creepy villain. He invades Shaw's privacy while she's in hypersleep by watching her dreams.



Indirectly impregnating her with an alien fetus, he informs her the next day that she's 3-months pregnant.



Shaw removes by herself the fetus by

Violent evolution, not religious faith, is at the film's center. The opening scene in its violence parodies Darwin's science of evolution, as we watch how humans evolved thousands of years ago from the engineers, and near the end of the film the only surviving engineer evolves violently from the alien to which the infertile Shaw had given birth—ironically from the engineers' own black liquid. There's violence, too, in the human evolutionary process from one generation to the next. While Shaw chooses to wear Holloway's ring following his violent death, her later placement of her father's cross around her neck emotionally resonates far more. Shaw is suffocatingly too close, however, to her dead, archaeologist father, and consequently remains emotionally distant from her supposed lover and fellow scientist Holloway. In contrast, Weyland's daughter, Meredith Vickers (Charlize Theron), openly hates her father for his refusal to die. “A king has his reign and then he dies. It's inevitable,” she coldly tells him. It's the natural order of things. He ignores her, and instead goes off with his “son” David as a guide to meet his maker. While Vickers will engage in a sexual encounter with Janek (Idris Elba), the captain of the *Prometheus*, she consents only to “prove” that she's not a robot. She, too, is stunted in her growth.

“As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods. They kill us for their sport,” Gloucester famously observed in *King Lear*, a tale about another father who also refused to go quietly into the night and is then driven mad by his daughters.[10] *Prometheus* likewise narrates a story of fathers and daughters, with Shaw playing Cordelia to Vickers' Goneril. These are secular characters trapped within a wholly materialist world that doesn't—and cannot—distinguish between good and evil or beauty and ugliness. “How do you know [paradise is] beautiful?” the young Shaw asks her father in her dream that David watches. “Cause that's what I choose to believe,” he answers. The human species possesses the possibility of a will to believe in beauty but too often is obsessed with finding scientific certainty. In contrast, its digital creations, such as David, resulting from the science of enlightenment, are inherently valueless, zeros and ones, and hence not capable of distinguishing between values—or, for that matter, perceiving any qualitative difference between human and artificial intelligence. If, as Weyland observes, David, who will never grow old and die, has no soul with which to appreciate his “gifts,” *Prometheus* suggests that the same may sadly also be true of humans. Evoking the classical, musical strains that informed the stasis of civilization's advanced technology in Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, *Prometheus* ends as it began with Frédéric Chopin's

recalibrating the ship's medical pod designed for men only.

"Prelude for Piano No. 15 in D Flat Major" (1838). Civilization is no guarantor of understanding or sublimity.

Like "Peter Weyland at TED2023" (2012) that had preceded *Prometheus*, the short promotional video "Alien: Covenant | Prologue: The Crossing" (2017) preceded *Alien: Covenant*.^[11] This 2½ -minute video that Ridley Scott directed focuses not upon Shaw or any of the other human characters but instead upon David, who narrates:

"After we made contact with the engineers, the *Prometheus* was destroyed.... But I escaped with Elizabeth on one of their ships. I was badly injured on our mission. She put me back together. I never experienced such compassion—certainly not from Mr. Weyland or from any human...We were finally going to meet our creator."

Our expectation is that Shaw and David will together meet their creator. Yet after placing Shaw in a hypersleep pod, David ends his narration as he arrives alone at the engineers' planet. He quotes briefly from the sonnet "Ozymandias" (1818) by Percy Shelley, the Romantic poet and husband of Mary Shelley. "Look on my works and despair," David intones. There's dissonance between David's empathetic view of Elizabeth and his cold, portentous voice quoting from Shelly's sonnet as he looks condescendingly down upon the engineers' planet. Percy Shelley's sonnet conjures up the "colossal Wreck" of the statue of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II with its "two vast and trunkless legs of stone." It speaks, like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, to the transience of both human life and art as well as the inevitable failure of male hubris. *Alien: Covenant* examines that hubris in the context of the supposedly evolutionary development of the human species in the form its now central protagonist and AI progeny, David.



Meredith Vickers, who represents the corporate funder of the mission, Weyland Corporation, exhibits a demeanor that causes the ship's captain, Janek, to ask, "Are you a robot?" She replies by consenting to have sex with him.



In contrast to Shaw, Vickers is wholly subservient to and resentful of her father, Peter Weyland, Weyland Corporation's patriarch



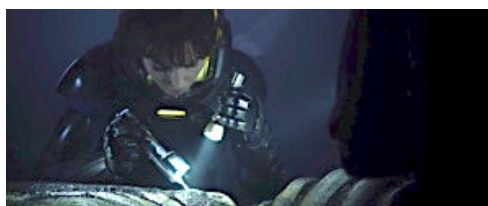
Her father returns her obeisance by rejecting her. He prefers instead the servitude of his own creation and "son," David.



Left: Shaw triumphs over Vickers. While Vickers doesn't stop to help Shaw (who has tripped) and is then crushed beneath the remains of the engineers' ship, Shaw survives by sliding to safety.



The *Prometheus*' crew discovers on a barren



Shaw dates the engineers' arrival on the moon



She also discovers that their DNA matches

moon the remains of the engineers' presence, including a monumental statue.



David in the meantime discovers in the cargo hold of the engineers' ship, urns that he later learns contain a deadly, black goo-like virus.



The engineer tries unsuccessfully to navigate his ship so as to destroy the Earth with the virus-filled urns.



Like his own maker, Weyland, David ceaselessly experiments – in this case with the engineers' black goo.



The surviving engineer unfortunately severs David's head from his body.

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as coinciding with the birth of Christ on Earth.



David also discovers through holographic recordings how to gain access to the engineers' navigation system—by playing a flute.



Shaw triumphs over the engineer. She lets loose the alien created from the engineers' black goo. The alien absorbs the engineer and further evolves.



Like the engineers, David perceives himself as god-like, literally at the center of a holographic universe.



Shaw rescues David's head and body in order to resume her exploratory mission. She will locate the engineers' home and learn why the engineers intended to destroy human civilization on Earth.

that of humans.



With David's help, Weyland meets the one surviving engineer and asks for immortality. The engineer replies by killing all but Shaw, who escapes.



Observing an engineer's head explode from within, David condescendingly comments, "Mortal after all."



Shaw records the final entry to the *Covenant's* log and will "boldly go where no man has gone before."

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Alien: Covenant* (2017)



In a promotional prologue to *Alien: Covenant* (2017), Elizabeth Shaw repairs David.



Shaw then navigates the engineers' ship, seeking to find answers to the same types of questions that Weyland had posed – who created us and why.

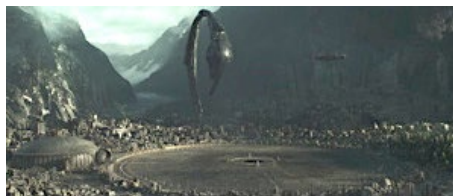


David eventually places Shaw in a hypersleep pod for the long journey ahead. Don't let the bed bugs bite, Dr. Shaw!

Alien: Covenant repeats many of *Alien*'s plot elements –

- A beacon message from an unknown planet induces a ship's crew to land on an unknown planet.
- The ship's computer is named "mother."
- An officer violates a quarantine protocol by allowing on board an infected crewmember.
- There's both a horrific face hugger and a chest-bursting scene.
- The lead female crewmember, Daniels (Katherine Waterston), eventually becomes the leader of the ship's crew.
- An alien (or in this case aliens) methodically kills off the crew.

Nevertheless, *Alien: Covenant*'s thematic focus is entirely different.[12] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Thus, *Alien: Covenant* opens with a prologue to the first prequel movie, *Prometheus*. This prologue depicts the "birth" of David to a middle-aged Peter Weyland, who then disappears from the movie. It also shows us a highly civilized human culture. Aligning that culture with Weyland, art and science blur as we gaze upon not only Weyland's AI creation but also some of Western culture's most valued, aesthetic artifacts—Piero della Francesca's "The Nativity" painting, Michelangelo's sculpture of the biblical David (the origin for the name of Weyland's AI), Carlo Bugatti's Throne Chair, and a Steinway grand piano. Refusing to believe that the birth of the human species was simply a matter of "biological chance," Weyland, David's self-described "father," insists that the "only question that matters" is to discover his own creator. All art, including that before us, is simply a means at seeking the answer. The universe with its many creations, is a problem that the enlightened Weyland will solve. Weyland is a contemporary Dr. Frankenstein, a capitalist leader of the industrial revolution who solipsistically insists upon his ability to understand and control his universe.



David arrives at the vast, monumental civilization of the engineers' home planet.



"Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" David declares as he observes the engineers' civilization below him.

Not surprisingly, David, Weyland's creation, displays that same hubris. Indeed, he will surpass his father's hubris, initially questioning in the prologue his father's mortality and later pitying him for that mortality. While Weyland selects the composer Richard Wagner but then criticizes as a "little anemic" David's playing on a Steinway piano of Wagner's "Entry of the Gods into Valhalla," the *Covenant*'s computer during the film's last scene will play a fully orchestrated version. An updated rendering of the myth of the ancient, Nordic gods, David represents in contemporary mythology the triumph of AI with the arrival of the feared singularity.[13] Like Weyland with his artifacts of high culture, David, too, reflects how culture is no guarantor of empathetic understanding, let alone sublimity. An exceptionally gifted flute player who learned his skill from the engineers[14] and who ironically plays a musical ode to the deceased Shaw as he's about to leave the



Alien: Covenant opens with a shot of David's eye. "How do you feel?" "Alive."

engineers' home planet, David is heartless in his will to create. Having killed Shaw, who had shown "such kindness" and empathy toward him, he prepares to kill Daniels, whom he acknowledges was worthy of the love—or duty—with which his double, the android Walter, had served her. Symbolically, David literally uses his flute as an instrument with which to nearly kill Walter, his "brother" who has refused to join him.



A middle-aged Peter Weyland tells David, "I am your father."



Weyland's room is filled with the great artifacts of Western culture.



"Why don't you play something, David?" He plays Wagner's "Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla." Director Ridley Scott is not without a sense of humor, what with the "music by" credit.



Questioned by David about his mortality, Weyland, David's creator, defensively asks that David serve him tea. Does the "Directed by Ridley Scott" credit reflect Scott's unease on his role as the creator of this film?

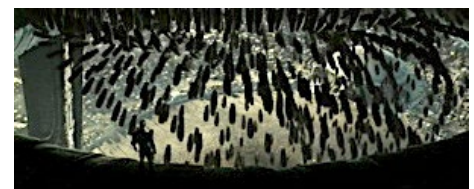
David's hubris is implicit in his quoting the sonnet "Ozymandias" as he drops the canisters of black liquid. He critiques the hubris of the engineers' civilization given its visual identification with the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II and the Roman city of Pompeii—the repeated images of grand structures in ruins, the beheaded statues and the piles of bodies still strewn on the ground. Yet his gesture in choosing to destroy violently that civilization (or arguably another seeded civilization of the engineers), like the engineers' own intended destruction of the human species, evokes the often-implacable God of the Old Testament. As cold as Michelangelo's aesthetically perfect sculpture after which he has named himself, David in the selection of his name ironically underscores at the same time the futility of his gesture. Michelangelo's sculpture of David, a product of Western culture's re-birth, namely the European Renaissance, will disappear, too. That David mistakenly attributes the sonnet "Ozymandias" to Lord Byron, another Romantic poet, further underscores the imperfection of David's vision. A solipsist in his inability to see or feel beyond himself, David can't understand his own limitations or the limitations that others necessarily place upon us if we are to coexist with them.[15] Presenting himself to the unsuspecting crew of the *Covenant* as savior from the attacking aliens, he is cloaked so as to resemble the deceased engineers. He, too, is a false god.



David represents the spirit of adventure, navigating the engineers' ship to their home



Appearing unknowing and innocent, the



David will annihilate what he views as

planet.

engineers, who created the deadly black goo, look up at their own ship that David navigates.



inferior beings. He drops canisters filled with the black goo upon the mortal engineers.



The black goo, a plague, will suffocate the engineers and their entire civilization.

The black goo massacres the engineers, their bodies piling up one upon another.



Like his father, David is a scientist. He experiments obsessively to create life. He has also experimented upon his "dear Elizabeth" Shaw, whom he acknowledges was kind to him in ways that Weyland was not.

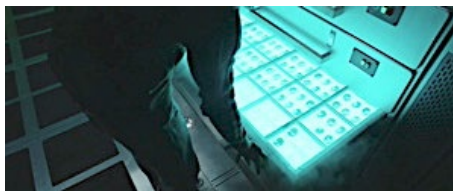
David openly evokes the Christian myth of Satan. Seeking to seduce Walter by observing that Walter has symphonies within him and humorously paraphrasing the Bible – "Idle hands are the devil's workshop" – as justification for his evolutionary engineering, David quotes for Walter the celebrated line from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667): "Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven." Walter, a later but less self-aware android model, prefers to serve[16]. In contrast, however, to Milton's Satan, David remains unsympathetic and lacks any tragic stature. David is morally and emotionally repulsive. David's AI is intelligence without consciousness, reason without emotion, and unbounded ego without limitation. Identified with Wagner's "Entry of the Gods into Valhalla" from the opera "Das Rheingold," David's obsession with creation – the sketches that line his laboratory walls, his repeated effort for 10 years to create the "perfect" alien, his experimentation upon Shaw whose carved out body we see in his lab, and the slight smile that crosses his face when he learns that the *Covenant* is on a colony mission ("so many good souls")—evokes the medical experimentation in concentration camps by the Nazis and their obsession with the creation and perpetuation of an Aryan pure race. David's chemical massacre of the engineers from above both evokes the opening of *Triumph of the Will* (1935), with Hitler's descent by plane through the clouds, as well as conjures up the holocaust, the mass annihilations during World War II of innocent civilian populations that were not appropriately pure.[16] David, the next evolutionary step in enlightened capitalism, is horrifyingly fascistic and intolerant of humanity. His destruction of the engineers evokes the Black Death of the middle ages and Ebola of contemporary times[17] in which a plague, without consciousness, kills all living species before it. If David can play the flute, as he boasts to Walter, David remains, however, a digitally created, inorganic character. He is a mechanical reproduction of the human species, and his projected evolutionary recreation of civilization will likewise remain a mere reproduction of life—a pathogen that requires a host with which to reproduce itself and evolve.



As the creator of a new life form, David is a proud father.



David holds his arms up, and his creation imitates the gesture.



David places his laboratory created embryos next to the human embryos.

Triumphant, he strides alone through the *Covenant* to the orchestral playing of Wagner's "Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla."



David is seemingly not without feeling as he tries to seduce Walter, an updated but noncreative android model. When Walter rejects David, David tells Walter that no one will love him like he does – and kisses him.



Like *Prometheus*, *Alien: Covenant* contrasts David with its central, female character, Janet Daniels. Following the prologue that introduces us to David, the film jumps ahead 10 years to 2104, and David does not reappear until about mid-way through the film. Our focus is instead upon the *Covenant* and its crew, especially Daniels with whom we quickly identify given the early, unexpected death of her husband, the ship's captain who dies from a "stellar neutrino burst." In contrast to the room depicted during the prologue, which was white, barren (but for the artifacts of high culture), and with an enormous picture window simulating the outdoors, the interior of the technologically advanced *Covenant* is less coherent visually. With the slow expansion of its gold colored, thin sails used to generate solar power, the ship resembles a beautiful, living creature. While each crewmember is the best in his or her field, each is also highly idiosyncratic, from the ship's new captain, Chris Oram (Billy Crudup), a person of religious faith, to the chief pilot, Tennessee (Danny McBride), a cowboy-like character in looks and attitude.[18] Moreover, in contrast to the secular hubris of Weyland underscored during the prologue, the ship's name, *Covenant*, evokes the God of the Old Testament who chooses to save the human and animal species from a flood and promises never again to destroy the world. The *Covenant* is, in fact, filled with married couples—a crew and 2,000 colonists, all of whom are married and in stasis together with 1040 embryos—for a journey to a "new world" identified as the planet Origae-6.[20]

Moreover, where David is associated with Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, Daniels is associated with Y. B. Yeats' lyrical poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1888). The crewmember in charge of the ship's terraforming bay, she along with her husband had envisioned building in their new world a cabin on a lake. Her last words to David, whom she mistakenly believes is Walter, are an invitation to join her at that cabin,[21] and David's failure to know Daniels' dream of that cabin reveals to her, albeit too late, that he is, in fact, David, not Walter. A youthful Yeats had envisioned such a cabin in the woods, "a small cabin...of clay and wattles made."

"Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee;
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;



In displaying his feelings, David only imitates human feelings. Thus, he plays a “farewell elegy” to his supposedly “dear Elizabeth.” He’s a parody of a parent, telling Daniels not to let the bedbugs bite even as he prepares to kill her in a hypersleep pod.

There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.”[22]

In contrast to the older Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” Yeats’ “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” conveys a Romantic’s vision of nature as sublime and redemptive. It also evokes the transcendentalist Henry Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854). It’s a vision that acknowledges human limitations and the importance of solitude. It’s wholly secular and yet transcendent in accepting that life is not understandable and is often without a humanly discernable purpose. Where Shaw had insisted on her supposed faith in religion in the form of her father’s cross that she wore around her neck, symbolically Daniels wears around her neck an old-fashioned nail, representative of the cabin that her husband, a more skilled craftsman, would build with her.



Daniels is consistently empathetic to others, including her new captain, Oram. She speaks with him in private about his potentially disastrous decision to investigate an uncharted planet.



Only Daniels looks back to wave at Maggie Faris, who remains behind with the landing craft and will be among the first to die.



Daniels later comforts in private Maggie’s husband, Tennessee.



She invites the android whom she believes is Walter, not David, to join her at her cabin on Origae-6.

Daniel’s utopian cabin is also contrasted with the religious faith of Oram, who becomes captain only upon the death of Daniel’s husband. Where, for example, Oram openly seeks to impose his will upon the crew in deciding to land upon the unknown planet from which the crew picks up radio signals, even as he poses as a congenial, consensus-building leader, Daniels asks to speak privately with him in her effort to persuade him of his mistake. She repeats that gesture of privacy when she later tells Tennessee that his wife has died.[23] Echoing Weyland’s refusal to believe in “biological chance,” Oram insists that the crew learn from the stellar neutrino burst that has killed the captain and others, since it cannot be a “randomized event” or “bad luck.” He insists that they “navigate the path as it unfolds,” choosing to investigate “planet number 4” based “all the data available.” Daniels, however, like her husband, insists on “free climbing,” without ropes, reflected in the image of her husband in a brief video in which he climbs up a steep mountain face without ropes.[24] She substitutes a responsibility to protect the colonists for Oram’s responsibility to explore. There’s modesty in Daniel’s view expressed to Oram that if it’s too good to be true, then it isn’t true. Daniels’ faith in nature represents enlightenment tempered by a Romantic’s vision. As



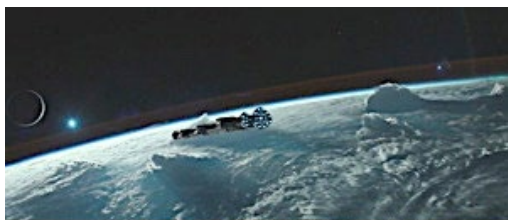
In contrast to Daniels, Oram asserts his authority under the guise of seeking consensus.



The crew raises a toast to Daniels' husband killed during the neutrino storm. "To all good people gone too soon. May we remember them."



In the meantime, Oram watches the burial onscreen, angry that the crew has disobeyed his order not to take a moment to memorialize the death.



Oram instead insists that they navigate what's before them— "explore strange new worlds."

philosopher Alfred Whitehead noted:[25]

"[T]he nature-poetry of the romantic revival was a protest on behalf of the organic view of nature, and also a protest against the exclusion of value from the essence of matter of fact....The romantic reaction was a protest on behalf of value."

While Oram speaks of how other crewmembers don't trust and reject as extremist persons of religious faith, the film rejects instead any faith that adheres to either a wholly mechanistic or human-centric view of the universe. When Daniels later asks that Oram "have faith" in their ability to escape from the planet, she implicitly is asking that he, too, "free fall" with her. Not all is knowable. That David soon seduces Oram by appealing to his inquisitiveness to know suggests the extent to which Oram is unable to do so.

In seeking to find his "makers" and later to become one such "maker," David, in fact, advocates, like Weyland and Oram, a belief in a wholly rational universe and as such a faith in a designer where there's ostensibly a design – a watchmaker where there's a watch. David's hubris reflects a belief in a universe that's logical and mechanical, and David simply aspires to become the designer—or god—of that universe. While he deceptively assures the fearful Daniels that "if we're kind, then the world will be kind," the film's narrative rejects that mechanical view, and homo sapiens is not at the center of the universe. The universe will remain unknown. In answer to Gloucester's despair, Edgar, Gloucester's son, admonishes his father, who has been blinded as a result of his loyalty to King Lear and had then sought unsuccessfully to kill himself:[26]

"What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure
Their going hence even as their coming hither.
Ripeness is all. Come on."

The ending of *Alien: Covenant* is both deeply moving and disturbing. Daniels expresses horror at her helpless realization that AI in the form of the android David has triumphed. Yet our sympathies remain with her not merely because we logically identify with her as a member of the same species but because we, too, possess not merely intelligence but also consciousness, feeling, including empathy, for others. Rejecting success or failure as the measure of a life, the film insists upon life, with its solitude and sublimity, as its own measure.

In 1979 artificial intelligence was barely spoken about outside of military and academic circles. AI technology is now, however, central to our lives. With the increasing disappearance of privacy and the greater reliance upon mathematical algorithms in order to predict and control behavior, it is not surprising that our fear of AI has increased exponentially. As one writer, Yuval Harari, has observed: [27]

"In the 150 years since Charles Darwin published..., the life sciences have come to see organisms as biochemical algorithms. Simultaneously...since Alan Turing formulated the idea of the Turing Machine, computer scientists have learned to engineer increasingly sophisticated electronic algorithms. Dataism puts the two together, pointing out that exactly the same mathematical laws apply to both... Dataism thereby collapses the barrier between animals and machines, and expects electronic algorithms to eventually decipher and outperform biochemical algorithms."

While Scott's two prequels revert to the old-fashioned horror genre that *Alien* had introduced, no longer is the alien species the source of the horror. Instead, AI, a mythic creation of the male of the human species, now represents the franchise's



Landing on the unexplored planet, he urges his crew to investigate. "Let's go find our ghost."

source of horror. Even Weyland, David's "father," experiences that horror in the prologue to *Alien: Covenant* when he encounters David's questioning of his maker's mortality and defensively reacts against that horror by humorously insisting that David serve him afternoon tea.

Like *Alien*, these prequels offer hope through their depiction of women. In the secularly named *Prometheus*, Shaw seemingly evidences a continued faith in god while in the religiously named *Alien: Covenant*, Daniels retains faith in a secular humankind. Notwithstanding its dystopian vision, however, *Alien: Covenant* is implicitly optimistic. While in *Alien* the message that draws the ship's crew to the planet turns out to be a warning message not to approach the planet, the "rogue transmission" that draws the *Covenant*'s crew is John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" (1971), a celebrated song about West Virginia.[28] Elizabeth Shaw, whom we view only momentarily as a recorded hologram and who plays the role of a Robinson Crusoe,[29] sings briefly about an imagined paradise, "almost heaven, West Virginia." These words evoke a desire to return home.

"Blue ridge mountain, Shenandoah river
Life is old there, older than the trees
Younger than the mountains, blowing like a breeze

Country roads, take me home
To the place I belong
West Virginia, mountain mamma
Take me home, country roads."



Humans are mortal, as evidenced by the charred body of Daniels' husband, Jake.

Neither Shaw nor Daniels return home, but we can nevertheless enjoy the process of their imagined journey. In contrast, David, the supposedly god-like creator of a new organic species, remains rootless and alone. In their depiction of the evolution of the secular mythology of AI, these prequels both critique the increasingly digital world of Western culture and implicitly offer an imagined paradise that no AI can achieve.

If, as Scott has claimed, there is at least one additional movie in the *Alien* franchise,[30] it remains to be seen where the next episode will take us, including the possible resolution of arguably open plot issues, such as whether Walter is, in fact, "dead" and whether the engineers or other engineer-created descendants reside elsewhere. Nevertheless, where *Alien* and earlier episodes in the franchise openly criticized corporate culture in the form of the greedy Weyland-Yutani Corporation, these two prequels address our unease with a mythology that threatens to envelop our very consciousness. They critique the contemporary direction of Western capitalism with its reliance upon enlightened, efficient AI to further enslave its citizens. The unjust death of Daniels, who is shut forever in a hibernation pod that is her "casket,"[31] reminds this author of King Lear's bootless lament about the unjust death of Cordelia,[32]

"Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman.
I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee."



Humans can, however, free-fall in their lives. Daniels, like Jake, climbs without ropes.

As a warning to his audience, Shakespeare concluded, "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." [33] Feeling remains central to human consciousness. Notwithstanding Weyland's claim to the contrary, Shakespeare's art is not an adventure in problem solving, let alone for capitalistic ends. Instead, *King Lear*, among Western culture's greatest of dramatic portraits of the human tragedy, insists simply that ripeness remains all.



Daniels finds no comfort in a holographic reproduction of nature.



Instead, she finds comfort in the dream that she shared with Jake—a cabin on a lake on Origae-6. In charge of the ship's terraform bay, Daniels wears around her neck a nail symbolic of that cabin.



Following Jake's random death, Daniels remembers their time together through photographic reproductions.



Daniels later catches a photographic glimpse of the deceased Shaw and Holloway from *Prometheus*.



A successful movie enables us to empathize with, remember, and engage in a conversation with its human creators. Will we remember the *Covenant* crew and, if so, how?

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Notes

1. Rory Cellan-Jones' "Stephen Hawking warns artificial intelligence could end mankind," *BBC News*, December 2, 2014,
<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30290540>.

Not surprisingly, Hawking's pessimism views other contemporary events as no less potentially apocalyptic.

"'Professor Stephen Hawking thinks the human species will have to populate a new planet within 100 years if it is to survive,' the BBC said with a notable absence of punctuation marks in a statement posted online. 'With climate change, overdue asteroid strikes, epidemics and population growth, our own planet is increasingly precarious.'"

Peter Holley's "Stephen Hawking now says humanity has only about 100 years to escape Earth." *Chicago Tribune*, May 5, 2017,

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/science/ct-stephen-hawking-escape-earth-20170505-story.html>.

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2. Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: U. of Ca. Press, 1967), 24.

3. For an analysis of how digital movies have changed the form and production of movies, see, for example, William Brown, "man without a movie camera – movies without men – toward a posthumanist cinema?" in Warren Buckland, *Film and Contemporary Hollywood Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

4. Director Jeunet has disclaimed authorship of the alternate, "special edition" ending that's available on DVD. Jean-Pierre Jeunet's Introductory Commentary to the Theatrical Release, *Alien Resurrection* DVD, Alien Quadrilogy. In that alternate ending, the earth has been destroyed, and Ripley and Call look upon the city of Paris shown in ruins, including a shot of a broken Eiffel Tower.

5. The phrase "more human than humans" is the Tyrell Corporation's slogan to describe the "replicants" or artificial beings with a limited "life" span that Dr. Tyrell, the movie's Dr. Frankenstein, has created in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982).

6. The complete promotional video can be found at
<https://vimeo.com/50383392>.

7. The *Alien* franchise has remained consistent in one respect. A non-US accent nearly always represents the "other" and hence symbolizes "evil".

8. Yuval Harari explores that connection between the scientific curiosity to know and the imperialism of capitalism in his chapter on "The Marriage of Science and Empire" in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015)

9. Mary Shelly, *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (New York: Everyman's Library 1992), 48. Shelly expresses her viewpoint through her then-narrator, Victor Frankenstein.

10. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act IV, scene i, lines 41-42.

11. The video “Alien: Covenant | Prologue: The Crossing” may be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivv5ef4TDNw>. In fact, several videos preceded *Alien: Covenant*. These include “Alien: Covenant | Prologue: Last Supper” (2017) and “Alien: Covenant | Meet Walter” (2017). Each seemingly includes footage that had been deleted from the released film.

12. This is not surprising, considering the emotional distance that Ridley Scott felt from *Alien* by the time that he made *Alien: Covenant* nearly 40 years later. Ridley Scott, “Audio Commentary,” *Alien: Covenant*, DVD (Aug. 15, 2017) [[return to page 2](#)]

13. In an extended version of the prologue that Scott deleted from the completed film, David describes at length the plot of this portion of Wagner’s opera. As described by David, the gods have rejected mankind as “weak, cruel and filled with greed.” Thus, they enter their perfect home in the heavens, Valhalla. Nevertheless, he adds, the gods were fated to die, since they were as venal as mankind. They were “false gods.” “Prologue (Extended),” *Alien: Covenant*, DVD

14. David observes a holographic record of the engineers’ flute playing in *Prometheus* as their means to start their ship’s navigation tools. He later plays that instrument when he shows these tools to Weyland in anticipation of awakening the one surviving engineer.

15. As Scott observes, Walter, in contrast to David, would never think of going against a human decision. Scott Commentary, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD. Walter’s humanity exists in the limitations and imperfections of his being.

16. The flashback depicting the slaughter of the engineers’ entire civilization was not in the film’s script. Scott insisted on filming the scene, however, believing that the film required an explanation of what had happened to the engineers. Moreover, Scott has said that he had originally thought of but then decided against including a reference in the film to Adolf Hitler. Not surprisingly, he is also however, obsessed with plagues and apocalyptic scenarios, noting that the aliens are a more aggressive, intelligent form of cockroaches and speculating that cockroaches may one day inherit the earth. Scott Commentary, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD.

It is also worth noting that, among the deleted scenes is a brief vignette in which crewmember Rosenthal briefly prays moments before an alien attacks and kills her by beheading. She recites in Hebrew the following well-known prayer from the Bible, Deuteronomy 6:4— “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” “Rosenthal Prayer,” Deleted and Extended Scenes, Extras, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD.

17. We learn in *Prometheus* that Shaw’s father died from Ebola, and David seems nearly gleeful in recounting to Shaw this fact that he’s learned while watching her dream in hypersleep.

18. Scott modeled Tennessee, particularly his hat, after Slim Pickens’ Major T. J. “King” Kong, the B-52 bomber commander in Stanley Kubrick’s black-humor, political satire *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). Scott Commentary, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD.

19. The mythology of a catastrophic flood is common to many cultures. See “List of Flood Myths,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_flood_myths.

For an interpretation of this mythology, see Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Chapter 4 (“The Flood”).

20. The word “origae” in Latin is the feminine, plural term for the word “charioteer” or “driver.” World of Dictionary,
<http://worldofdictionary.com/dict/latin-english/meaning/origa>.

21. Daniels’ acceptance of Walter as human or its equivalent is reflected in a deleted scene in which Daniels expresses her desire to be with Walter at her husband Jacob’s funeral. While the crew is comprised entirely of couples, Daniels notes that Walter would know something about being alone. “Jacob’s Funeral (Extended),” Deleted and Extended Scenes, Extras, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD.

22. The full text of Yeats’ “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” may be found on numerous online sites, including
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43281/the-lake-isle-of-innisfree>.

23. Two deleted scenes from the completed movie underscore this difference in the characters of Oram and Daniels. In one, Oram tries to console Daniels for the death of her husband by telling her that she must “cry it out.” Daniels replies angrily by telling Oram that she will mourn his death in her own way. “Oram and Daniels (Extended),” Deleted and Extended Scenes, Extras, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD. In the other, Walter consoles Daniels by observing that the terraform garden is ideal for growing cannabis. Daniels replies by noting that Walter’s gesture demonstrates how he is not simply the result of programming. “Walter Visits Daniels,” *Alien: Covenant*, DVD.

24. Scott clearly sides with Daniels in this debate. Thus, Scott comments that the initial disruption of the space flight was a “random accident,” since you can’t plan for everything. Coincidentally, he describes his own DVD commentary to the movie as “unplanned” and “off the cuff.” Scott Commentary, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD.

25. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1925), Chapter 5 (“The Romantic Reaction”), 94.

26. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act V, sc. ii, lines 9 – 11.

27. Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 372.

28. Coincidentally, John Denver’s song is at the emotional center of Steven Soderbergh’s *Logan Lucky* (2017). It’s the favorite song of the lead character, Jimmy Logan (Channing Tatum), who (accurately) tells his young daughter that the writers of the song had never been to West Virginia. Nevertheless, late in the movie his daughter chooses to sing this song during a competitive pageant. The audience sings along with her, and she wins the pageant.

29. Scott has characterized Shaw’s brief role in *Alien: Covenant* as that of Robinson Crusoe. Scott Commentary, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD.

30. Supposedly John Logan, a co-screenwriter on *Alien: Covenant*, is already writing “Covenant 2.” Eventually the narrative will form a “back door” into the original *Alien*. Scott Commentary, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD.

31. Scott uses the term “caskets” to describe these hibernation pods. Scott Commentary, *Alien: Covenant*, DVD.

32. *King Lear*, Act V, sc. iii, lines 328–330.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Mother! and the cli-fi conundrum

by [Joseph K. Heumann](#) and [Robin L. Murray](#)



The poster of Jennifer Lawrence as Mother gives away its main plot point—the destruction of “Mother Earth.”



In the film *Noah*, Darren Aronofsky presents Noah as an action hero and eco-warrior.

We went to see Darren Aronofsky’s most recent film *Mother!* armed with the director’s own claims about the film being about Mother Nature’s “love and her gifts and the way people ultimately cause her pain” (Dockterman 72). [[open endnotes in new window](#)] According to *NYT* reviewer Melena Ryzek, Aronofsky even told Jennifer Lawrence “The movie is about climate change, and humanity’s role in environmental destruction.” We wanted to find the commentary on climate change we were promised. What we found instead was a visually appealing homage to the 1960s avant-garde that presents women, their bodies, and a feminized earth as replaceable and interchangeable, like the parts of a mass-produced rifle.

Aronofsky is no stranger to movies meant to enlighten audiences about environmental disasters and climate change. Aronofsky donned his Cecil B. DeMille suit in *Noah*, presenting a hero (Russell Crowe) who teaches his family to live sustainably, protecting nature as a steward rather than a figurative rapist. But even in this more blatant cli-fi film, *Noah*’s also a super-masculine action hero protecting the Earth from humanity at any cost. In this reboot of the biblical story, Noah decisively revises God’s plan to rebuild all life, including humans, by eliminating wives and children from the Ark. In other words, because “everything that was beautiful, everything that was good we shattered, mankind must end.” Humanity would have died off if Noah’s grandfather Methuselah (Anthony Hopkins) had not intervened. The remaining extended family serves as a curious genesis for the rise of human populations around the world.

In *Mother!*, Aronofsky also draws from biblical stories as “myths that belong to the world” because, as Aronofsky explains, “There’s power to them” (Dockterman 72). The bulk of *Mother!* seems to comment on another Genesis story, turning Earth’s ecology into a home, a literal and confined ecology protected by an innocent but sexualized Mother played by a back-lit Jennifer Lawrence, who “want[s] to make a paradise.” She reproduces as she renovates each room, and with the pregnancy near the film’s climax, connects her work with the birds, wind, and grass “creations” beyond the house.

While she spackles a wall in the home she is renovating, clouds even seem to emanate from the yellow putty, and visions of breathing human organs appear behind the wall. According to IndieWire, “Lawrence is Gaia, or Mother Earth, defending the living, breathing organism she has built into a perfect home. She can’t handle or fully understand why people are being so disrespectful.” When uninvited guests arrive, they bring up even more biblical stories with disastrous results, from Adam and Eve and the pregnancy, to the Cain and Abel battle between two sons (Domhnall and Brian Gleeson), a basement fiery furnace, and a perversion of the Christian Eucharist.





In mid-renovation, Mother gazes at the natural Eden surrounding the domestic paradise she is creating.



Mother's spackling of a wall is compared to Mother Nature's creation of a natural Eden.

But the experimental look of Aronofsky's *Mother!* is also a return to modernist cinema of the 1960s and the movement's prevalent exploitation of women. Ingmar Bergman's explorations into the soul via *The Silence* (1963), *Winter Light* (1963), and *Persona* (1966) showcase this modernist look, with intense close-ups, enclosed spaces, and fractured narrative lines. *Mother!* most readily brings to mind Bergman's *Shame* (1968), wherein a man and woman sharing an isolated home are suddenly invaded by forces out of their control and forced to become refugees in a world destroyed. *Mother!* also encapsulates time changes and narrative ruptures ala Bergman.



In Bergman's *Winter Light* (1963), intensity is derived from tightly enclosed interior spaces, a visual tactic that expresses the anxieties of the "contemporary woman."



Bergman's *The Silence* (1963) explores the soul through its Modernist aesthetic. **[be more specific about visuals here]**



Extreme close-ups in *Persona* (1966) reveal the feminine psyche writ large.



In *Shame* (1968), the world is destroyed, and forces out of a couple's control invade their isolated home.

These tropes are also played out in Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (1962), *Repulsion* (1965), and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), isolating people in enclosed places and, most pertinently for us, examining women trapped both physically and psychologically. Luis Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) and *Belle de Jour* (1967) suggest being trapped in a place is a metaphor for being trapped

within a lifestyle one wants to escape. Horror films from the 1960s like *The Innocents* (1961) amplify the threat women feel when trapped in a home that seems to be possessed. This domestic prison extends to bodies most explicitly in Robert Aldrich's *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962) and *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964).



Belle de Jour (1967) examines the confining interior life of a "modern woman." **[be more specific]**



Hush, Hush...Sweet Charlotte (1964) draws on the skills of three Oscar winning actors to amplify the home as a domestic prison.



Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (1962) isolates characters in a tiny boat.



Repulsion (1965) presents a masculine take on a woman trapped both physically and psychologically.



Aronofsky cites Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) as a major influence on the staging of *Mother!*. **[explain how]**



The Innocents (1961) highlights a woman trapped within the interior of an author's and a director's inspiration. **[be more specific]**

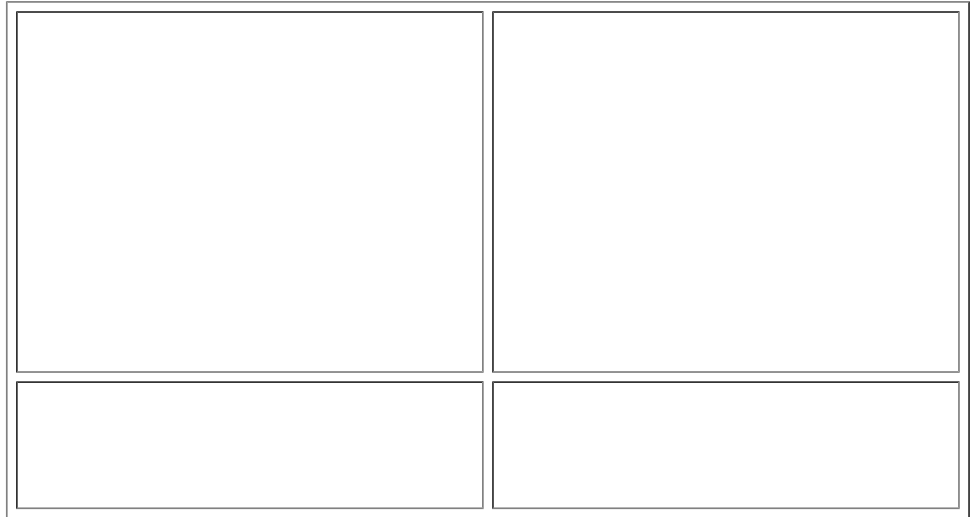
Mother!'s attempted environmental message seems inspired by both the avant-garde style and throwback heroines of these modernist films. Aronofsky seems to borrow both visual and narrative strategies like these to force his tale into an avant-garde milieu. The oppressive close-ups, which, of course, are far more challenging on a huge theatre screen, detail every facial expression, especially of Lawrence, bringing to mind the torturous role given to Falconetti in Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928).



Dreyer's imagery in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) has a key influence on 1960s Modernist filmmakers. **[be more specific]**



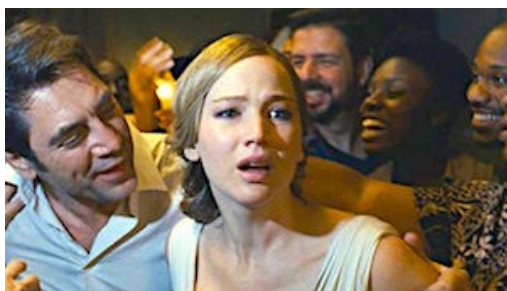
Aronofsky reintroduces the trapped woman in *Mother!*, as she was in the 1960s Modernist films and Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc*.



But Mother's association with earth turns the film into an ecofeminist's nightmare. The insertion of the feminine "muse" amplifies the relationship between consuming the body and consuming the land by drawing on what Annette Kolodny calls "America's oldest and most cherished fantasy" grounded in "an experience of the land as feminine...enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless integral satisfaction" (*The Lay of the Land* 4). This feminization of nature draws on multiple gender stereotypes. For Kolodny, "men sought sexual and filial gratification from the land, while women sought there the gratifications of home and family relations" (*The Land Before Her* 12). As ecofeminist Jytte Nhanenge argues, "there is an interconnection between the domination of women and poor people, and the domination of nature" (xxvii).

Mother! opens and closes with the fire, ash, and rock of a woman, and it is Him (Javier Bardem) who adds her crystal remains to his stand, a clear demonstration of his dominance over Mother and the earth she represents. Him lost everything in a fire when he was younger and found the crystal in the ashes. "It gave me strength to begin again," he explains. But "Mother fixed up every room by herself." Jennifer Lawrence's milky-skinned Mother supports Him through the majority of the film, worshipping Him as the storyteller, even though only she, as both earth and literal Mother, creates, preserves, and renovates the domestic world around them. Despite her industry, Mother claims Him is working too hard on his writing. We see Mother in close up while she cooks, refurbishes, and collects firewood to serve his every need.

This need for dominance gradually grows more violent when uninvited guests damage Mother and her home. Him cannot write until odd visitors disturb their home's tranquility and punish the Mother who created it. Him invites each into their home and embraces even their most destructive actions. The Man (Ed Harris) arrives first, claiming the house as a Bed and Breakfast. Him seems energized by the visit, but Mother nearly collapses in pain. "We don't know him," Mother explains, but Him welcomes the Man, despite the coughing that seems to interact with the throbbing lung in the wall. His entrance introduces the fire that



Aronofsky draws on *Rosemary's Baby* in his portrayal of Mother's reaction to Him (Javier Bardem).



The first intruder in *Mother!* disturbs Mother's creation of paradise.



Public sexual displays amplify the destruction of Mother's domestic Eden.



Ever larger hordes of invaders intensify Mother's pain.

opens the film when Mother walks barefoot into a dank basement to collect linens. As she scuttles over the uneven floor, flames erupt from an old furnace, and we see the fire from Mother's point of view. In the morning there are more signs of disarray—cigarette butts in the ashtray and a vomiting Man with a big cut on his back. "Give him some privacy," Him orders, and Mother's suffering becomes palpable as she knocks an ashtray off a table and buckles over in pain.

The next visitor is The Woman (Michelle Pfeiffer), The Man's wife, whose entrance distracts Mother enough that breakfast scorches and both Mother and the Woman burn themselves, but only Mother eases the pain with ice. The camera twirls around her as Mother serves food on a tray to the guests. The Woman thanks her for her hospitality but minimizes The Mother's work: "Isn't it a lot harder than starting fresh?" she asks, and presses Mother about children. "Then you'll be creating something together," she tells Mother. "This is all just setting."

The Woman's sons enter Cain and Abel-style, violently, fighting to the death on a wood floor. During the funeral wake that follows one brother's death, Mother is set up as a fiend who won't let visitors mourn and celebrate, even though they're destroying her home. Visitors ignore her as she tells them to get off a sink sagging under their weight. Unreinforced, it crashes, gushing water everywhere. The house is a wreck, but the Woman only gives her dirty looks as she tries to clean it. Like a 1960s heroine, Mother screams hysterically, "It's about you and your work. You think it will help you with your work. Bring new people and new ideas. I'm the one who's suffocating. You talked about wanting kids. But you can't even fuck me."

When his story of Mother's creation is suddenly published, the eco-disaster on display becomes almost unbearable to watch. The hallucinogenic sequences show a home invaded by ever-larger hordes of followers of Him. Him and the visitors take even more from Mother and her home. "But it's not yours," Mother tells the masses stealing food from her table, while Him orders her to "share it. They're just things. They can be replaced." Eagerly Him even shares their newborn son with the mob, perhaps because he knows another woman will fix the mess and call him "Baby." The only way Mother can cope with such intense pain is immolation. In the end, Mother gives us the environmental message we crave: "You never loved me. You just loved how much I loved you. I gave you everything, and you gave it all away."

In a May 2014 interview, deep-green activist Dan Bloom—arguably the first to use the term cli-fi for climate fiction and film—asserts, "I believe that cli-fi novels and movies can serve to wake up readers and viewers to the reality of the Climapocalypse that awaits humankind if we do nothing to stop it" (Vemuri). Bloom's claims echo those of Rahman Badalov, who in 1997 declared, "Blazing oil gushers make marvelous cinematographic material.... Only cinema can capture the thick oil bursting forth like a fiery monster." But Badalov not only views these oil gushers as monstrous nature. He also notes the dual message of monstrous nature cinema: to both condemn environmental degradation and entertain with spectacle. Bloom's admission that "the impact of cli-fi novels and films has been minor, very minor" may point to the same dual role of cli-fi cinema. For Badalov and Bloom, cinema has the potential to bring environmental issues such as climate change to the forefront. But the cinematic mechanism also has the potential to obscure that message with spectacular beauty. In *Mother!*, the treatment of women, of Mother, obscures any cli-fi message with disgust.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



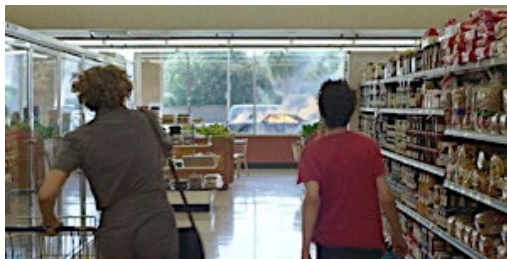
It's 1979 in Santa Barbara, California.



Santa Barbara seems a nondescript place.



A Ford Galaxy is on fire.



Dorothea and Jamie, mother and son, rush

20th Century Women: gender and the politics of history

by [Robert Alpert](#)

Mike Mills scripted and directed *20th Century Women*. It is both a personal “love letter” to Mills’ mother and sister who had raised him[1] [[open notes in new window](#)] as well as an examination of gender inculture, an examination that Mills had already begun in his autobiographical *Beginners* (2010) about his terminally ill father.[2] For those aware of its autobiographical elements, the movie sounds a personal note, teasing the viewer to differentiate between what’s “real” and what’s “fiction,” even as it examines broader cultural issues. For those unaware, it both possesses the emotional appeal of the classical Hollywood melodrama as well as evokes the independent, innovative filmmaking of such “women’s films” as *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), *Antonia’s Line* (1995), and *Certain Women* (2016). The movie avoids the escapism of contemporary Hollywood fiction, and Mills has instead sought to partake of the independent New Hollywood cinema of the 1970s in which male directors, such as Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese, transcended through formal innovations the constraints of a conservative Hollywood. Like all of these independent, innovative film directors, Mills in *20th Century Women* portrays a personal drama that is simultaneously political.[3] The movie entertains even as it seeks to enlighten its audience about gender.

The movie depicts its characters through a series of separate but interconnected stories – childhood, adolescent rebellion, adulthood and death – and collectively these stories reenact a U.S. cultural history in which the options seem increasingly narrowed, eventually pivoting at a particular historical moment – 1979. Reenacting how he was raised, Mills dramatizes a cast of characters with a wide range of ages – from the central character Dorothea (Annette Bening), who was born in 1924, to her androgynously-named son Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann), who was born in 1964 – and the decades in between – 40 year-old William (Billy Crudup), 28 year-old Abbie (Greta Gerwig) and 17 year-old Julie (Elle Fanning). Even the house in Santa Barbara, California, within which this communal group of characters is living, spans the last century. Built in 1905, this multistory, sprawling house was occupied until World War II by a family that then lost all of its money. Thereafter, the house passed through a series of hands, until Dorothea, who “completely fell in love with it,” came to own the house, renting rent rooms to Abbie and William, with the latter helping her renovate. As we learn from the epilogue, beginning in 1983 until she dies in 1999, Dorothea continues to live in the house with Jim, a character whom we never meet.

The result is a movie that surveys 20th century U.S. history. It recounts the past lives of each character before he or she joined Dorothea’s communal house as well as projects forward, including into the next century with the birth of Jamie’s son following Dorothea’s death. While the family home in U.S. movies has often represented an American ideal, seemingly depicted, for example, by the extended

through a supermarket ...



... and gaze in disbelief at their car on fire. "That was my ex-husband's Ford Galaxy in which we drove home our son Jamie from the hospital," Dorothea's narrative voice over informs us.



It's also the same, quintessentially American car that Jean-Paul Belmondo drove into the sea in Jean Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). It's 1979, and it's the end of an era, even if these characters don't yet know it.



Like Godard, screenwriter and director Mike Mills in *20th Century Women* often splashes his scenes with color.

Smith family in Vincente Minnelli's musical *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), Hollywood's family dramas in such genres as melodramas and musicals, including, too, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, consistently offer an underlying criticism of the home. They simultaneously critique romantic love, the institution of marriage and the all-American family. Such widely disparate Hollywood films as *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1944), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), *American Beauty* (1999), and *Rachel Getting Married* (2008) put the lie to these myths, including the "happily-ever-after" ending of Hollywood films.[4]

20th Century Women follows in that tradition. It offers hope in its brief portrait of the seeming disappearance of patriarchal hierarchies. Nevertheless, it also depicts an increasing transience and fragmentation no less disturbing. The movie assumes that its contemporary audience of 2016 knows what's coming so as to place in context its narrative. It centers upon 1979 in order to arrive at an understanding of how political history informs gender in 2016. Indeed, the 2016 election in the United States of a President who openly bragged of his groping of women and the disclosure in 2017 of how a major movie producer for decades had sexually harassed women with impunity underscore how gender remains central to an understanding of the U.S. political system.

Methodology

Contemporary Hollywood filmmaking relies heavily upon clichés that reaffirm the status quo. Beginning in the 1980s with the U.S. presidency of Ronald Reagan, Hollywood films, such as *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), promoted a nostalgia in which history was replayed and often corrected to better conform to a conservative social agenda. Time itself was infinitely malleable so that anything seemed possible, thereby affirming neoliberalism with its promotion of individual achievement at the expense of communal social values. Films such as *Aliens* (1986) and *Working Girl* (1988) reinforced that agenda by incorporating women within the ideal of the U.S. film hero, conflating in the process independence with progressiveness.

While not overtly nostalgic about times past, contemporary franchises, such as *Captain America* (2011-2016) or commercially popular movies, such as *La La Land* (2016), routinely avoid the present tense or acknowledge that time matters. Instead, they engage in a mythmaking that offers escapism from social discomfort as well as celebrate a non-existent, fantasy landscape of clear good and evil. Such movies are ahistorical. While audiences enjoy a critique of capitalism at the seeming expense of the corporate producers, they simultaneously identify with its authority and power – and contribute financially to its bottom line. In much the same way that classical Hollywood movies presented through editing, lighting and other techniques a seamless narrative that masked the means of their production, the animated effects through digital CGI of contemporary movies result in audience disengagement from history. Significantly, while classical Hollywood openly acknowledged the divide between fantasy and social reality, creating a formal distinction between the color photography of the Land of Oz and the black and white photography of Kansas, contemporary cinema erases the distinction. The onscreen fantasy replaces and thereby defines the audience's social reality. Thus, in Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999) the villainous Cypher (Joe Pantoliano) prophetically cautions the heroic Neo (Keanu Reeves), who is soon to learn "the truth" by leaving the matrix, to "fasten your seatbelt, Dorothy, 'cause Kansas is going bye-bye." This reversal of Kansas and Oz announces how the comforting and entertaining illusion of a seemingly cohesive social matrix (the AI's duplication of a clean, bright urban United States in 1999) has largely supplanted for audiences the grim reality of having to work at the creation of community (symbolized by the rebels' dark craft named



Late in the film Dorothea and Jamie will at last seemingly resolve their differences. There's a splash of the color red.



Who are Dorothea and Jamie? Mother and son watch together ...



... Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, Hollywood's romantic fantasy to which Dorothea aspires.



A title card informs us of Dorothea's particulars.

Nebuchadnezzar where the rebels eat gruel for breakfast). In this respect, *The Matrix* anticipated the contemporary Internet where algorithms determine our available choices and social networks replace face-to-face relationships.

Mills in *20th Century Women* adopts a different approach. Resisting the contrivance and manipulation of plot-centric films and instead wishing to create a portrait of and meditation on persons from his past,[5] his film consists of a non-linear, episodic style that is evocative of the early 1960s French New Wave, the inspirational source for the New Hollywood films of the 1970s. Mills has, in fact, cited such directors as Francois Truffaut and Alain Resnais as well as others of the period, such as Federico Fellini, as his source.[6] Interestingly, he has characterized *20th Century Women* as a cross between a Howard Hawks movie, with its equivalent rendering of genders measured by “professional competence and social awkwardness,”[7] and a Resnais movie, with its obsessive focus on time, memory and the material present.[8] An admirer, too, of the filmmaker Jean Luc Godard,[9] whose Brechtian disruption of film narrative was once revolutionary but has since become commonplace as one of the traits of postmodernism, the film continually disrupts its narrative.

The movie is tightly scripted, however, as reflected in the screenplay’s inclusion of both dialogue and images[10] as well as the movie’s frequently close adherence to that screenplay.[11] Nevertheless, Mills has also insisted upon the importance he places on tailoring the movie to the actors themselves.[12] Thus, he films in sequence. “Shooting in order, I really believe in that.”[13] Like such “women’s film” genres as the melodrama and the musical, *20th Century Women* simultaneously draws us in as well as distances us from the story. When combined with its often-episodic story, it makes us self-conscious of a contingency, namely our own presence in history and the arbitrariness of gender. It largely lacks a clear beginning, middle and end, let alone in that order.[14] Moreover, through a variety of formal techniques, the movie shifts the focus from the story to the raw material of the narrative construction, thereby resulting in a meditation upon its fictional characters within the context of an openly reconstructed history.

The movie adopts numerous strategies that disrupt the classical narrative arc, including:

- Title cards – With the exception of Jamie, Mills’ surrogate, title cards identify each character – DOROTHEA FIELDS BORN 1924, JULIE BOWEN BORN 1963, ABBIE PORTER BORN 1955, and WILLIAM SAUNDERS BORN 1939. A character voiceover simultaneously provides the background for each character. Title cards also identify celebrated feminist essays – THE POLITICS OF ORGASM — SUSAN LYDON and IT HURTS TO BE ALIVE AND OBSOLETE: THE AGING WOMAN BY ZOE MOSS.
- Reading feminist writings – Such writings include *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled* and Robin Morgan’s anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*, and the film comments on each. Abbie, for example, reads in voiceover Moss’ “It Hurts To Be Alive And Obsolete: The Aging Woman.” In the meantime, we watch as Dorothea finds a pornography magazine in Jamie’s room, underscoring the traditional view of female “sexuality” as consisting of women as youthful, fantasy objects for the male gaze. Jamie reads to Dorothea from the anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*, and Dorothea comments that she doesn’t need to read this book to know its



Jamie then explains that his mother had lived in a time of sad cars and sad houses.



It was the Great Depression.



But people were happy.



Dorothea had wanted to become an air force pilot, but the war ended.

message. The film seeks to resuscitate for its contemporary audience the ideas of classic, “second-wave” feminist texts by its portrait of fictional characters who are only then/now discovering that history.

- Cranked up film speeds and distorted color – Julie sneaks out at night in hyperkinetic motion from her parents’ home and later cartwheels in jerky motion along the bottom of a deserted swimming pool. Cars repeatedly zip by in kaleidoscope colors. Mills draws upon his early career as the creator of music videos. Not incidentally, too, by reverting to the technologies of a “primitive” Hollywood and evoking, for example, the magical filmmaking of George Méliès, the movie underscores the deliberate seamlessness of Hollywood artifice.
- Obsessive tracking — The camera slowly tracks out of the kitchen in which Dorothea sits at the table contemplating the music she hears upstairs. The camera slowly tracks into the car in which Julie is having sex with an unknown boy. Such repeated, random tracking both cherishes and seemingly freezes the arbitrariness of the moment. It also reinforces the transiency that these rootless characters experience.
- Narrative discontinuities – A series of discontinuous scenes introducing us to Dorothea’s background and Jamie’s childhood interrupt Dorothea’s birthday party so that we unexpectedly jump from Dorothea’s birthday celebration to a shot of her guests leaving the party. Like a musical refrain, narrative events are often arbitrarily repeated, such as the unanticipated but repeated recounting of Dorothea’s death from cancer in 1999. In Mills’ view, we experience time not as linear narratives but as emotional trajectories.[15] If history belongs to the victors, then individual memory represents the imperfect stories that we tell to make sense of our lives.
- Stock shots – Stills of punk rock stars from the 1970s pass before us as Dorothea comments on the demise of punk music. When Julie confesses to Jamie that she doesn’t have orgasms but enjoys men’s bodies, we gaze at shots of men openly and joyously displaying their bodies.[16] The film portrays the past as a series of discrete moments and our cultural history as the present photographically embalmed, thereby evoking the cinematic realism of André Bazin, the philosophical forerunner of the French New Wave.[17]

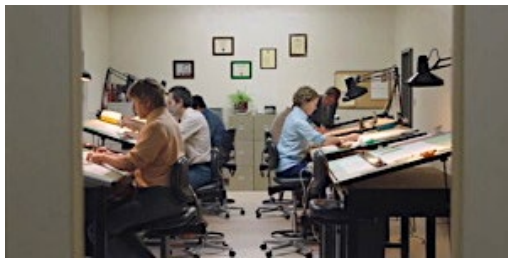
Breaking the fictional “fourth wall” through actors theatrically projecting their fictional futures, *Twentieth Century Women* makes us acutely aware of that wall.

- Well-known, contemporary actors participating in celebrated historical events — Annette Bening, Elle Fanning, Greta Gerwig and Billy Crudup play fictional characters who casually talk about or watch important, then-contemporary events broadcast on TV – President Nixon advocating a continuation of the war in Vietnam, President Ford falling down the staircase of an airplane, and President Carter speaking on the energy crisis. The film inserts its contemporary actors within a transparently artificial reconstruction of history. The fictional character Dorothea, who watches these events, is simultaneously the middle-aged, celebrated actor whom we know as Annette Bening. Like Annette Bening, we know from the perspective of 2016 that just as punk music is ending and Reagan will be elected U.S. President, these national TV broadcasts will give way in the 21st century to the fragmented viewing of unfiltered news videos released over the Internet.[18]

The movie openly examines how the media inform our perceptions:



After the war, she worked in the drafting department of the Continental Can Company. Is this image a photograph of director Mills' mother working in that department? The fictional Dorothea is a loving, if failed, portrait of Mills' mother.



The fictional Dorothea, too, works in that drafting department. She's, in fact, the only woman.



Dorothea incessantly smokes Salem cigarettes, because they're "healthier" and were once thought "stylish" and "edgy."

Photography – Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) is a kind of subtext. Photography, according to Sontag, mediates and becomes a substitute for life, often resulting in political disengagement.[19] Referring to Sontag's book, Abbie enacts implicitly that observation. She initially announces that she is photographing everything that happens to her in one day, including taking pictures of her gynecologist, who doesn't object, and later of Julie, who does and observes, "I didn't happen to you." Still later, Abbie announces that she is photographing everything that she owns, showing to William her collection of Polaroid images – her bra, a birth control device, shoes, a picture of Abbie's mom and, of course, Sontag's *On Photography*. William instinctively reacts at how collectively beautiful – and yet also sad – these images are. Abbie's photographs, which she takes with a high-end but now obsolescent, Polaroid camera, freeze life and in the process disconnect the photographer from the photographed. The movie will later demonstrate how Abbie is disassociated from history.

- Music – The film alternates between 1940s big band music (Dorothea) and 1970s punk rock (Jamie). Thus, we shift from an image of Dorothea and William at home with 1940s music playing in the background to Jamie and Abbie at a nightclub where punk rock music is playing. If punk defines Mills' generation, then "As Time Goes By," as memorialized in Dorothea's favorite 1940s movie, *Casablanca* (1942), is emblematic of her generation. Music, like gender, is rooted in historical myths, and the song "As Time Goes By" will define Dorothea's romantic sensibility no less than the actor Humphrey Bogart will define Dorothea's understanding of gender.

Given the playful teasing of our expectations and the insistent disruption of the conventional narrative, we cannot fully identify with the movie's semi-autobiographical characters. These unexpected disruptions, however, enable us to perceive the fictional nature of our culture's history, and, as such, *20th Century Women* is a political film. It self-consciously reenacts the past in order to enable us to understand the present. It examines gender in the context of the pivotal shift in 1979 of U.S. 20th century culture, including feminism. As Mills has observed when asked about the film's "intertextuality," that is, its reference to other works of art,[20]

"The way that we construct our identity or a story of ourselves through the culture that we're living in and the different texts, the books, the music, the films that sort of support the narrative of, 'What is the world we're living in?' Then, on a deeper, more personal level, 'Who am I in that world?'"

My last few films are really interested in that, and how do we build the story of ourselves, and in this film, it's a lot about in relationship to these other people, sometimes unlikely allies."

While the movie is arguably autobiographical insofar as Mills is recollecting events about his past life, with Dorothea and Jamie as surrogates for his mother and himself, the movie also reflects an understanding of how historical reconstruction is impossible given the imperfection of memory and the cultural processes of time. As Mills has also observed,

"All portraits are failures, because people are just so much more paradoxical and crazy and impossible to contain. But it's a worthy failure." [21]



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The narrative



“My son Jamie”—In place of a title card, Dorothea, played by Annette Bening, recreates for us a portrait of Jamie, Mills’ idealized view of himself as a teenager.

20th Century Women underscores how “history” is not an impersonal, objective text but rather a series of cultural icons and memories that reinforce a political ideology. Movies, of course, play a key role in that creation. On a trivial level, Abbie has dyed her hair red upon seeing David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976). More significantly, in reply to Jamie who has asked whether Dorothea was ever in love with her husband, Dorothea admits marrying him only because she had believed in the myth that she was supposed to fall in love. The movie *Casablanca* signifies that expectation. Thus, early in the movie we watch with Dorothea and Jamie the celebrated airport scene in which Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) renounce their romantic love for the sake of the latter’s conventional marriage to the wartime hero Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid). As Julie elaborates one night to Jamie:

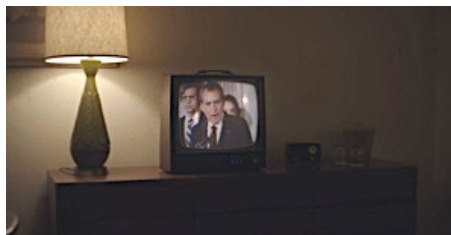
“Love is supposed to be a feeling that you feel. People say that they’re falling in love, but they’re not actually falling in love. It’s a fake connection that you feel with someone, and marriage should never happen.”

Thus, there is poignancy in how Dorothea late in the film imagines her “next life” with Bogart who supposedly “knows what I’m thinking. He makes me laugh and he really sees me.” Dorothea stubbornly – and sadly – clings to this cultural icon and her understanding of history as defined by 1940s Hollywood.

Dorothea is not alone in this cultural entrapment. Jamie, Mills’ surrogate, “grew up with a meaningless war, with protests, with Nixon, with nice cars and nice houses, computers, drugs, boredom.”



Where Jamie reconstructs his mom’s past through photographic images, Dorothea recalls Jamie, who was born in 1964, through a series of TV images, such as the “meaningless war” in Vietnam or the anti-war protests ...



... or President Nixon.



Of course, there were also nice cars ...



... nice houses ...



... advanced computers
(now obsolescent) ...

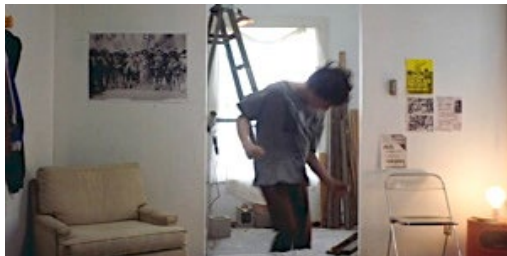


... drugs ...

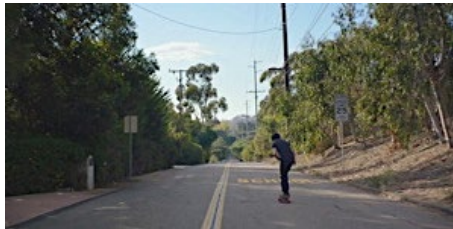


... and boredom.

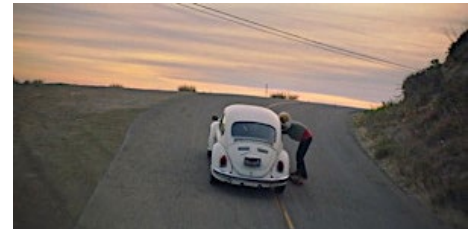
A series of TV images illustrates the common childhood for Jaime's generation – napalm dropped on the Vietnam countryside, U.S. anti-war protests, President Nixon, an outdated personal computer and a group of bored kids. Not surprisingly, the then-adolescent Jamie seems lost and untethered. Trying to find a mentor for her son and echoing the narrative of Susan Faludi's best-selling *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), Dorothea surely speaks for Mills' discomfort when she observes, "I think history's been tough on men, they can't be what they were, and they can't figure out what's next." Thus, she enlists Julie and Abbie, not William, in her effort to help Jamie develop an understanding of what it means to be a "man."



Dorothea sadly confesses that each day she knows less and less to her son Jamie, who wildly dances to punk rock music.

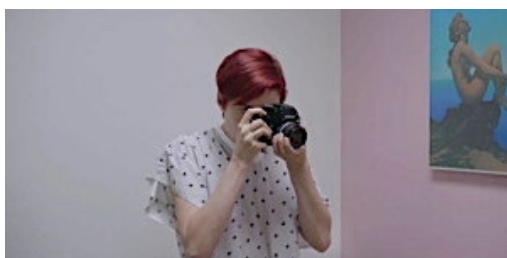


Yet skateboarding, Jamie is also free to choose his way. The older generation raises the younger one so that the younger one may one day leave the older. That's equally sad and comforting.



There are only moments of grace, such as when mother and son briefly come to understand one another and Jamie skateboards while holding on to Dorothea's car door. "It was never really like that again," Jamie observes. In the epilogue that follows we learn how his mother died of cancer from smoking.

William is as inappropriate a model for Jamie as he is the inappropriate lover for Dorothea. William fixes things[22] — from his retooling of a 1940s car for Dorothea to his renovation of Dorothea's house – and he attracts women. [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Nevertheless, as he concedes, he doesn't know what happens next in a relationship with women. Historically imposed cultural roles too often define our gender.



In contrast, Dorothea, asking Jamie to be there for Abbie, who's about to receive her cervical cancer test results, observes how Jamie's mere presence, his empathy, suffices, adding an implicit critique of William.

Men control history, and the lives of women too often suffer as a consequence. We are introduced to Abbie, a photographer who rents a room from Dorothea.

“Men always feel like they have to fix everything for women, or you’re they’re not doing anything. But some things can’t be fixed. Just be there. Somehow, that’s hard for all of you.”



A medical test defines Abbie.



She is pleased to learn that she has no malignant cells.



The doctor's surgery, however, has resulted in her “incompetent” cervix.



The doctor explains that Abbie probably may not give birth to children.

Dorothea argues for – and the film endorses – empathy in place of the male insistence in contemporary Western culture of an unbounded male authority.[23] Jamie's effort to absorb emotionally the radical feminist writings to which he is introduced is, of course, fraught with failure insofar as he can never fully understand the cultural oppression of women. Notwithstanding that he later engages in a fight with one of his male friends over the source of women's sexual pleasure and reads to Dorothea from Zoe Moss' *It Hurts To Be Alive And Obsolete: The Aging Woman*, Dorothea implicitly rejects his claim that maybe he's a feminist. While in the script Dorothea openly rejects his claim, observing that “that's easy for men to say,” the movie instead enacts a scene filled with discomfort and awkwardness on the part of both mother and son.

Dorothea: So, you think that's me?

Jamie: I don't know.

Dorothea: So, you think you know me better because you read that?

Jamie: No.

Dorothea: Then why are you reading it to me?

Jamie: I thought it was interesting.

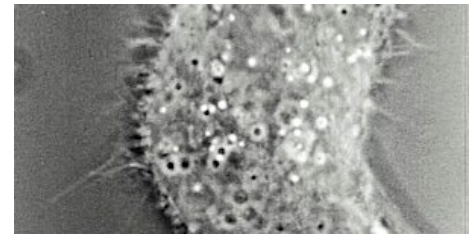
Dorothea: Ok, well, I don't need a book to know about myself.

Jamie: Sorry.

Regardless of whether Jamie is a “feminist”, it's a scene in which both characters express pain and will only relieve, if momentarily, that pain near the end of the movie when Dorothea openly acknowledges her feelings and Jamie comes to accept and empathize with those feelings. Jamie's education during the course of the movie consists of his learning to empathize with another person, in this case his mother, and his empathy is the beginning of his maturity into adulthood. Thus, Abbie observes (to a skeptical Dorothea) that she's helping Jamie become a man, possibly a “good man,” by learning about a female orgasm, a miracle in that men historically haven't cared. It's enough that she's developing within him the beginnings of human empathy.



Abbie tells her prognosis to the young, uncomprehending Jamie who has chosen to accompany her to her appointment.



Even Abbie's supposed friends in NYC can't deal with the early test results from Planned Parenthood.



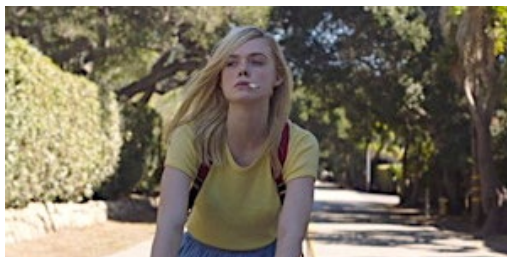
Only 17, Julie (on the extreme left) will flee from her therapist mom's teen group sessions and retreat to Dorothea's house.



Abbie later learns the source of her cancer. Her mother took DES, a drug recommended by the male medical profession for treating pregnant women. Mother and daughter don't speak again.



Rejecting the male medical advice, Abbie years later becomes pregnant and gives birth to two sons.



Like Jamie she momentarily achieves a measure of freedom – biking and smoking cigarettes.



She confesses to Jamie that she — like her friends — has never had an orgasm.

Mills' film expresses that same empathy. Thus, for example, it mournfully depicts the moment in which Julie confesses that she's never had an orgasm nor have any of her friends. Julie sexually satisfies boys but is herself never satisfied. She speaks of how she enjoys how they look at her, how they get a little bit desperate and the little sounds that they make, and claims that she does it because half the time she doesn't regret it. Nevertheless, the sorrowful music on the soundtrack makes apparent her suffering. Sexually active early in life, mistakenly thinking that she's pregnant from one of her encounters, and implicitly accused by Jamie of being a "slut," the film's epilogue discloses that Julie later falls in love with a new boyfriend, Nicholas, and moves to Paris, the cinematic city of romance. Yet she and Nicholas choose not to have children. It's a choice — but a poignant one given Julie's sexual history. The film endorses her choice but empathizes with her pain. Jamie's education — and that of the audience — results from a developing sense of empathy for such pain.

Dorothea, too, feels the painful constraints that a male culture has imposed upon her and all women. Thus, Jamie quotes from Zoe Moss' *It Hurts to be Alive and Obsolete: The Aging Woman*:

"Don't pretend for a minute, as you look at me that I'm not as alive as you are, and I do not suffer from the category of which you are forcing me. I think stripped down I look more attractive than my ex-husband, but I am sexually and socially obsolete and he is not." [24]

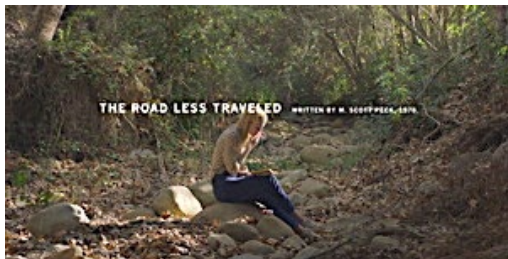
A member of the generation of women that was largely uncomfortable with acknowledging such feelings, both sexual and emotional, and, therefore, consistently closing herself off to her son, Dorothea later chastises Abbie for teaching him this "hardcore feminism." Yet frustrated in that she never achieved her dream to become an Air Force pilot when World War II ended before she could finish flight school, later isolated by the men in her department at Continental Can Company as a result of her being the only woman, and now largely overlooked sexually because of her age, Dorothea represents how gender compels women to adopt roles of behavior that don't coincide with their desires. While skilled as a result of her Air Force training and thereby able to obtain as



She takes pleasure in the unexpected bodies and sounds of young men ejaculating.



"Why do you do it?" asks Jamie. "Because half of the time I don't regret it," she replies.



Trying to understand her life as a maturing woman, Julie reads feminist literature. What does it mean to "fall in love"?



It's 1979, and home pregnancy tests will empower women, such as Julie. Accompanying Abbie to her doctor. Jamie reads about these newly marketed tests.

well as keep a well-paying job, unlike many women who following the ending of World War II were replaced by returning male veterans, she experienced the cultural isolation of women who don't conform. Dorothea only momentarily becomes self-aware of the inhumanity of these cultural myths about gender when she speculates to Jamie how she chose to marry her co-worker at Continental Can Company, Jamie's father:

"Or maybe I felt I was just supposed to be in love. Or I was scared that I'd never be in love. So I just picked the best solution at the time."

While then retreating to her fantasy of an afterlife with Bogart, a Hollywood star who substitutes for the lover whom she's never experienced, she and Jamie momentarily enjoy a "new relationship." Significantly, there follows a scene in which Dorothea, Abbie, Julie, Jamie and William enjoy a communal dinner of take-out food in a motel room where they also briefly dance together to the soundtrack of oldies from the 1930s and 1940s. It is a moment "of grace...and connection," according to Mills,[25] in a film that treats its characters with gentleness but in which such moments of grace and connection are rare.

On the one hand, the movie is generous in its portrait of its characters, exemplified by the film's metaphoric use of music. Jamie, who was born in 1964, dances wildly to – as well as believes in – punk. Abbie, who was born in 1955, does not wholly understand but still she's just a part of such music. And even the middle-aged Dorothea, who expresses discomfort with the disharmonies of punk music, acknowledges how she, like William, is overthinking it, and comes to enjoy, if momentarily, its sounds. The film's generosity consists in portraying these generational, musical icons along a continuum in which no character is excluded. Presenting a mixtape to Jamie as thanks for his accompanying her to the doctor, Abbie generously extends the best of her generation to Jamie:

"These are a bunch of songs that I think my life would have been better if they'd been around when I was a teenager. So, I'm hoping that if you listen to them now, you'll be a happier and more realized person than I could ever hope to be."

Notwithstanding that history imposes cultural differences upon these characters, they find in music a common, shared ground. Reflecting Mills' background, the movie offers comfort in the ineffable sounds of music.

Of course, too, the film is hardly rosy-eyed in its view of history. There is a consequence as a result of each character's seemingly arbitrary place in history, and some are not pleasant. Raised in the 1930s, Dorothea grew up during the Great Depression when the United States, under President Roosevelt, believed in a social contract between its citizens and at times seemingly reflected a more gender-neutral, certainly less libertarian era. Nevertheless, both her fierce independence and her incessant cigarette smoking historically define Dorothea. If Mills mythologizes his mother by his adoption of the name Dorothea for his character, which he claims he based on the 1930s-documentary photojournalist Dorothea Lange,[26] and by underscoring throughout the narrative her uniquely independent life style, he also introduces her as the smoker of Salem-branded cigarettes ostensibly because "they're healthier." A product of her culture, she smokes incessantly, because cigarettes were "stylish and sort of edgy." Listening to a punk band, Dorothea empathetically observes mid-film, "It's 1979. I'm 55 years old. This is what my son believes in." Abruptly, however, and matter-of-factly, her voiceover adds, "It's 1979 I'm 55 years old. And in 1999, I will die of cancer, from the smoking." That same evening, she explains how she will prepare for Y2K – canned food, water, gold coins – but also reiterates how she will die from lung cancer before the New Year.

Describing the 1965 Ford Galaxy that's in flames during the film's opening scene, Jamie observes that it "smelled like gas and overheated all the time, and it was just old." [27] Dorothea could readily have been describing herself when she replies, "Well, it wasn't always old. It just got that way all of the sudden." As depicted in the films of director Mike Leigh, whom Mills has acknowledged as a source for his respect for the everyday, [28] history consists of the passage of individual lives, and culture is the collective mythology of those lives. Mills' film focuses upon the cultural, ideological trajectory of history, and *20th Century Women* makes plain that that future augers poorly for its fictional characters and hence for its then contemporary audience.



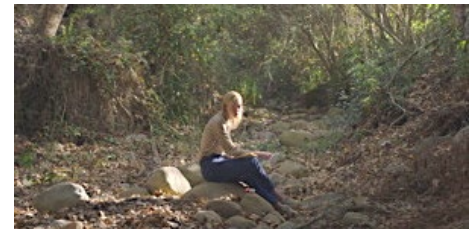
The male pharmacist doesn't know what to make of Jamie and his purchase.



Jamie, too, enjoys a moment of liberation, skateboarding home to Julie with his purchase.



Not knowing what to make of this off-the-shelf medical test, Julie tries it. She waits two hours and joyfully learns that she's not pregnant.



Julie will later go on the pill with Abbie's encouragement, stop talking with her mom, fall in love with Nicholas, move to Paris, and choose not to have children.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

U.S. political history



20th Century Women autobiographically recounts how Mills' mom and sister raised him on "radical feminist" literature. Abbie hands a stack of such books to Jamie, including the women's health book, *Our Bodies Our Selves*.



Dorothea also puts the lie to Mills' seemingly progressive reconstruction of his past. The young Jamie mistakenly thinks that feminist literature can explain who Dorothea is. The older Jaime's recreation of what happened is likewise nothing more than a reflection of what he has become.

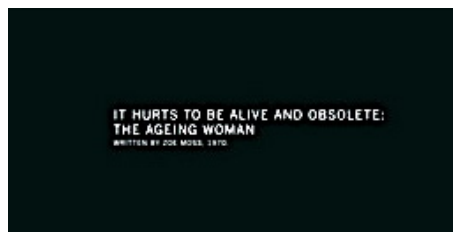
20th Century Women opens with a title card that announces that we are in Santa Barbara, California, and that it is 1979, the year in which the Iranian revolution and the overthrow of the U.S.-supported Shah of Iran resulted in both a hostage crisis and a further energy crisis. That same year the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which Congress had passed in 1972 with a ratification deadline of 1979, failed to achieve passage by the requisite number of ratifications by state legislatures. Thus, incredibly, U.S. culture denied women an express acknowledgement of "equality of rights under the law.... on account of sex." Of course, during that same era women also achieved a partial measure of control over their bodies, a right that the U.S. Supreme Court had first recognized in 1973, [29] when, as depicted in the film, home pregnancy tests were introduced to the United States. The promise of the "second wave" of feminism that began in the 1960s seemingly teetered between cultural acceptance and rejection in 1979.[30] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)



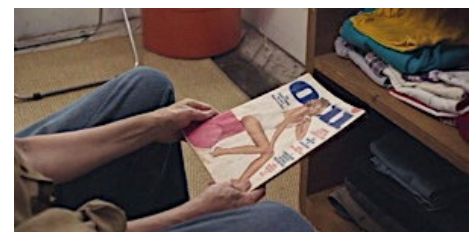
Jamie reads from *The Politics of Orgasm*.



He opens the anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*.



He later reads about the "ageing woman."



Dorothea in the meantime discovers *Oui* in Jamie's drawer.



It's 1979 from the perspective of 2016. U.S.

The scene of communal watching of — and the divided reaction to — then President Carter's televised speech on July 15, 1979, underscores the film's view that U.S. culture rejected feminism as a result of its broader ideological acceptance of neoliberalism. Carter spoke about the energy crisis but more broadly identified a "crisis of confidence." Dorothea, William, Abbie, Julie, Jamie and their friends sit gathered together in rapt attention around the image of the President's TV broadcast from the White House, a broadcast in which Carter observed at length:[31]

"We always believed that we were part of a great movement of humanity itself called democracy... In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption.

President Jimmy Carter delivers on TV his “crisis of confidence” speech.



Dorothea, William, Abbie, Julie and Jamie, together with their friends, gather to listen.

Human identity is no longer defined by what one does but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning...

We are, at turning point in our history. There are two paths to choose. One is the path I've warned about tonight — the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility. It is a certain route to failure.

All the traditions of our past...point to another path: the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values. That path leads to true freedom for our nation and ourselves. We can take the first steps down that path as we begin to solve our energy problem. Energy will be the immediate test of our ability to unite this nation.

Let commit ourselves together to a rebirth of the American spirit. Working together with our common faith, we cannot fail.”



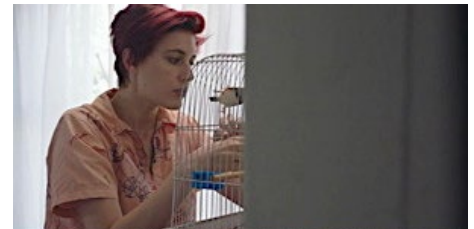
Carter speaks of the disappearing meaning of our lives ...



.... our growing self-indulgence and consumption of material goods ...



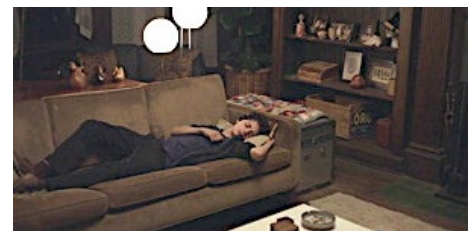
... even as we discover that owning things doesn't satisfy our longing for meaning.



We had always believed that we were part of something.



We are, in fact, at a turning point in our history.



Down the path that we're then going — and will continue to go — lies a mistaken idea of freedom found in self-interest.

Carter's speech represented a candid acknowledgement of the anxiety and fragmentation then enveloping the United States. From the perspective of 2016, with the increased divisiveness and ever more elusive sense of common purpose and values, Carter's appeal to rational choice seems almost quaint. Following



"He's so screwed" is the common reaction. Dorothea is alone in viewing Carter's speech as beautiful.

Carter's speech, several young men unthinkingly respond, "Wow, he is so screwed" and "It's over for him." In contrast, Dorothea instinctively reacts, "I thought that was beautiful." She, however, like Carter (who was also born in 1924) is a member of a prior generation, namely "our fathers and mothers...who shaped the new society during the Great Depression." [32] She continues to believe in collective enlightenment. Everyone else, however, is silent and looks at Dorothea uncomprehendingly.

Earlier in the film listening to and observing with some incomprehension a punk band, Dorothea not only foresees her own death before the end of the millennium but also observes, "They don't know this is the end of punk. They don't know that Reagan's coming." Carter's broadcast thus represents a turning point in U.S. history, and its communal viewing in the film is a backward glance at a social culture that soon disappeared. [33] Where, for example, Santa Barbara in 1979 was "worn out," today it is far wealthier such that Mills could not even document that earlier time through filming *20th Century Women* only in Santa Barbara. [34] For Mills [35] 1979 represents the "beginning of now." While it was a time of recession and boredom, it also possessed an "unmonetized quality. In fact, the United States failed to solve its "energy problem," and suburban, gas-guzzling SUVs became the norm. One year later, in 1980, B-movie actor Ronald Reagan soundly defeated Carter for the U.S. presidency, and in 1984 with his "morning in America" TV commercial, which offered the nostalgic-infused image of a white and male United States, Reagan likewise overwhelmingly defeated Carter's Vice President, Walter Mondale. As many have noted, U.S. culture has only increasingly fragmented, [36] particularly with the Internet that pervades all aspects of our lives, [37] and self-interest is now praised as furthering an expansion of a "free market economy." U.S. President Trump, a reality-TV personality, has extended Reagan's vision of a U.S. culture in which individual ownership and consumption, not common purpose, are paramount values. In contrast to 1979, 2016 consists of an "aspirational culture" [38] in which we continue to obsessively seek "owning things and consuming things." [39]



The generational divide continues over a communal dinner in which Abbie tells everyone that she's menstruating. "Do we really need to know everything that's going on with you?" asks Dorothea.

The communal living room scene shifts to the dining room where, tellingly, the generational divide persists in a conversation about the word "menstruation." At Dorothea's request, Jamie tries to "wake up" Abbie, whose head is down on the table. Abbie refuses to stir, instead announcing to everyone, "I'm menstruating." To Dorothea's embarrassed consternation, Abbie is relentless in her insistence that everyone, including Jamie and all of the men at the table, acknowledge her state by saying the word "menstruation."

"If you ever want to have an adult relationship with a woman like if you want to have sex with a woman's vagina, then you need to be comfortable with the fact that the vagina menstrates. Just say menstration. It's not a big deal."



"It's not that big a deal," Abbie replies.



She encourages Jamie to say the word "menstruation" to Dorothea's consternation.



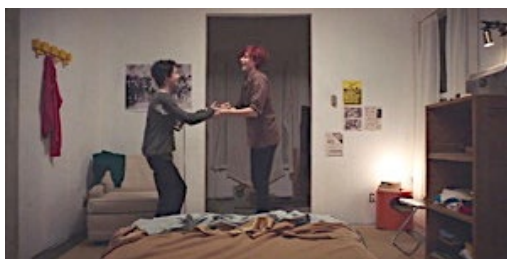
Julie therapeutically confesses how she experienced her first period.



Dorothea abruptly ends the dinner. "Let's call it a night."

Everyone joins in and repeats the word as a kind of mantra, including Julie, who recounts the first time that she menstruated and as a result missed the ending of the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. William, in turn, reveals to her the movie's symbolic ending in which "the big Indian guy" broke "free." If second-wave feminism discovered that "the personal is political," then Abbie is furthering that agenda.

Yet that progress is arguably disquieting in the face of the historical shift that Abbie and others have just witnessed. It is as though Abbie has substituted a collective, but private gain for an historical change that's been openly articulated and is about to be set in motion. Arising out of the 1960s counter-culture, Abbie's feminism focuses on a politics of white privilege, not addressing class economics, let alone race. The film hints at that privilege in describing how the working-class William suffered in his unsuccessful, romantic pursuit of the "better off" Theresa. Her commune friends "made him feel old and uneducated and poor." Indeed, *20th Century Women*, like most films, elides these economic and racial issues. The film only casually observes how Dorothea is financially secure as a result of her daily, early morning management of her investment stock portfolio, a ritual that she passes on to Jamie. Moreover, the film never acknowledges how Dorothea's renovation of her house in the "worn out" area of Santa Barbara surely resulted in its gentrification — the disappearance of lower and middle class housing and the contemporary influx of housing for the wealthy that filmmaker Mills bemoaned. In fact, however, Mills chose not to introduce economics and race in his film, as evidenced by his deletion of a scene that might have underscored, if briefly, these issues.[40] Thus, too, Abbie, a photography artist of white middle class privilege, in her insistence in speaking the word "menstruation" emphasizes the individual at the expense of the social and communal. More broadly such a focus on the individual will later align feminism with the coming of neoliberalism, an efficient, economic system but with a regressive distribution of benefits to the few at the expense of the many.[41]



20th Century Women offers moments of generosity. Abbie makes for Jamie a mixtape,

As the central figure of *20th Century Women*, Dorothea represents an idealized counter-point to that development. As Jamie apologetically explains to Julie, whom Dorothea has enlisted in her efforts to raise Jamie as a "man," Dorothea "was raised in the Depression. Everyone helped everyone. The whole neighborhood raised the kids." Instead, we now rely upon professional therapists,

hoping that these songs, which were not around when Abbie was a teenager, will make Jamie a happier and more realized person. They dance wildly together.



When Dorothea complains how she'll never know Jamie as he continues to grow into manhood, Abbie hands to Dorothea a Polaroid shot of Jamie. There he is out in the world.



Jamie, in turn, later tells us that he'll try to explain to his own son about his mom, but it will be impossible



The film expresses the pleasure of momentarily knowing others - even if it's reflected through the lens of an imperfect memory. Dorothea confesses to Jamie that she doesn't want him to be unhappy like she's been.

psychologists and psychiatrists. Thus, for example, Julie resents and rebels against her therapist mother, who includes Julie in a group confessional session of teenage girls, and flees to the more open, less structured setting offered by Dorothea's house. Not surprisingly, therefore, Dorothea, in contrast to everyone else, remains embarrassed at openly and therapeutically speaking the word "menstruation" and hence abruptly ends the communal dinner. Raised under Roosevelt's view of culture as a social contract, only Dorothea acknowledges the beauty of Carter's vision, and her acknowledgement as the film's central character underscores the film's view of the succeeding generations' failure, including the failure of feminism, to offer a meaningful alternative to that historical, cultural shift. If the personal is political,[42] then it is equally the case that the political is personal.

Jamie's voiceover initially observes that when his mother was his age "people drove in sad cars to sad houses with old phones, no money or food or televisions but the people were real." Depicting nostalgically Roosevelt's era through a series of black and white photographs, Mills' movie places Dorothea within an openly mythical, simpler time from which Mills' surrogate, Jamie, is excluded. A child of the Great Depression and World War II, the semi-fictional Dorothea is defined by the daredevil exploits of the androgynous Amelia Earhart as well as the cinematic romanticism of Humphrey Bogart as Rick in *Casablanca*. Like Mills' film, however, Dorothea is sufficiently self-aware to know that such romanticism is not of this world, even as she enjoys the pleasure of its fantasy. "This is no time to be rational sweetie, can you just go with this?" she asks her son as she fantasizes an afterlife with Bogart. Thus, too, the film ends on the utopian image of Dorothea flying in a biplane, which her companion Jim rents each year on her birthday, with the song "As Time Goes By" playing on the soundtrack. The film self-consciously leaves us with this image of a woman who was an unconscious feminist, the first woman in the Continental Can drafting room whom the men categorized as a lesbian, as though the term were a curse.

20th Century Women is a generous mixtape, like the one that Abbie presents to Jamie, and, as such, is ultimately optimistic. While Dorothea initially refuses to respond to Jamie who has asked whether she's happy, she also observes that suffering, "having your heart broken," leads to learning about the world, a kind of wisdom. She doesn't consciously know the source of her unhappiness – perhaps the growing doubt about the meaning of her life, as President Carter had identified, or her conformity to gender expectations that *Casablanca* and other movies had imposed. Sadly, Dorothea's husband didn't turn out like she'd envisioned him, since the best that she could say about him was that he was left-handed. On the other hand, surprisingly, Abbie finds happiness by settling down with husband and children in her hometown that she had sought to escape. As Abbie observes to Jamie, "Whatever you think your life is going to be like, just know, it's not going to be anything like that." There's a joy in Abbie's expression of this historical uncertainty. There's optimism in that she and others may still be fortunate enough to experience that uncertainty.

In the film's most confessional scene, Jamie lovingly observes to his mother, "I thought we were fine, though, just me and you." The moment passes, and we watch Dorothea driving her VW as Jamie hangs onto the car door and skateboards down the highway. The uncertainty of each moment is redemptive, and such generosity is exhilarating. Writing in mid-19th century England about "the history of man," the feminist author "George Eliot" could have been describing Mills' Dorothea when she concluded *Middlemarch*:

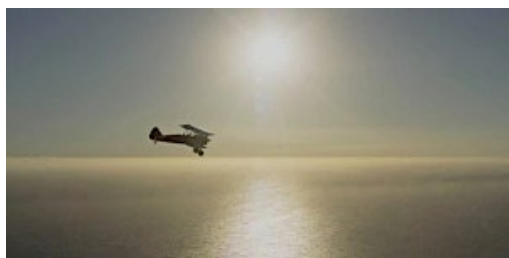
"[T]he growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life,



Dorothea, William, Abbie, Julie and Jamie together enjoy a brief moment of grace.



With the song “As Time Goes By” playing on the soundtrack, Mills fantasizes his mother in an imagined afterlife with her hero Bogart. She flies solo like her other hero, Emilia Earhart, high above Santa Barbara.



We imagine Dorothea’s exhilaration as she disappears in the film’s final shot.

and rest in unvisited tombs.”[43]

Conclusion

Feminism has sometimes seemed too narrowly focused. Personal economic advancement has trumped empathy for others. Such feminism focuses on gaining a greater share of the commercial pie, without asking who baked that pie and why. [44] Thus, for example, Amy Schumer in *Trainwreck* (2015) represents gender equality in her replacement of Steve Carell in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), but both characters reinforce the regressive perspective of “geek comedy” in which anarchy barely conceals the enshrinement of the patriarchal family.[45]

In depicting what it means to be a woman in the 20th century, *20th Century Women* envisions a broader, more progressive view of gender. It seeks to define “man” and “woman” so as to underscore a common humanity in an historical process that increasingly excludes that commonality. Dorothea’s decision to enlist Abbie and Julie in raising Jamie — “He likes you and you. He likes you a lot.” — focuses on the emotional connection that defines our relationships, not the culturally defined characteristics of “man” or “woman.” While Dorothea views Jamie as “all men,” she also acknowledges that he is not. Gender, a form of cultural mythology, does not — and need not — wholly define us. The film’s depiction of gender depends upon its creation of a sense of history, drawing upon our awareness of the present so as to openly place within that context our past. Our relationship with one another, including gender, defines our body politic, our culture, but history informs both. Mills’ film generously adopts a collective — and optimistic — view of humanity insofar as we may evolve in our understanding and development of gender. His film is clearly autobiographical. “Like the kid in the film, I grew up with a strong mom, two older sisters, and mostly with women.” Yet it’s also self-critical. “I’ve spent most my life trying to figure out women from an outsider’s perspective...”[46] It thereby lays the foundation for possible future understandings and political progress.

Highlighting the connection between the upcoming election of President Reagan in 1980 and the Internet in 2016, *20th Century Women* engages in a dialogue with its audience that seeks to raise questions about how and what we value by looking backward, not nostalgically but rather by a modest examination of how we may have come to our present state of affairs. It favors progressive cooperation over Darwinism with its supposed myth of the survival of the fittest. It is feminist in promoting an optimistic faith in the possible humanity of politics. Opening with an overhead shot of the Pacific Ocean near Santa Barbara and closing with Dorothea’s expression of excitement and happiness as she flies high above the Santa Barbara coast as “Time Goes By” plays in the background, *20th Century Women* looks both backward and forward in articulating Mills’ depiction of relations no longer gendered — other than as an expression of both self-identity and common humanity. It’s a film both of the moment, documenting our cultural crisis, and outside of time, offering hope in its loving tribute of an aging son to his long-deceased, independent mother — who at least momentarily on film could achieve her utopian dream of piloting her own plane and becoming her cultural icon, the aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



U.S. President Donald Trump displays his signature to the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.

Postscript

It is well over one year since the release of *20th Century Women*, and the historical arc depicted in the film has only accelerated. Among the dramatic turns in the United States is the passage of a new tax law. Titled the “Tax Cuts and Jobs Act,” it reverses longstanding tax rules and includes, among other provisions, the following:

- A drastic reduction on a permanent basis of the corporate tax rate;
- A temporary lowering of the individual tax rate, including the tax rate for the wealthiest individuals, and a still lower tax rate for wealthy investment managers;
- A substantial reduction of the estate tax for wealthy individuals;
- The effective repeal of the deduction for state and local taxes, thereby arguably advancing, if indirectly, the dismantling state and local governments that often, if partially, fund public transportation systems, anti-poverty programs, public schools and the like;
- The enactment of a tax-preferred savings plan encouraging wealthy individuals to choose private and religious schools;
- The enactment of a 20% deduction of revenue for sole proprietors, thereby encouraging “independent contractors,” such as Uber drivers, in place of the traditional employment relationship that had guaranteed such safety net features as unemployment insurance, workers’ compensation, workplace anti-discrimination laws as well as minimum-wage and overtime laws; and
- A repeal of the “individual mandate” on healthcare, thereby increasing the costs of medical insurance for the sick and disabled.

There’s pettiness, greed, and mean spiritedness in the enactment of this Act.[1] [\[open Postscript endnotes in new window\]](#) There’s also an element of class warfare. Thus, one senator moralistically observed in supporting the lowering of the estate tax for the wealthy,

“I think not having the estate tax recognizes the people that are investing, as opposed to those that are just spending every darn penny they have, whether it’s on booze or women or movies.”[2]

Add to this Act the quiet dismantling of much of the federal regulatory system, including in the areas of finance, anti-trust, worker and consumer protection, land use, telecommunications, and climate control, it becomes apparent how the United States is rapidly undoing the legacies of Roosevelt’s New Deal (from the 1930s and 1940s) and President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society (from the 1960s). Both had advanced the social contract through the passage of numerous laws, such as a progressive tax code, a national labor relations board, the formation of numerous regulatory agencies, as well as the passage of social security, civil rights, Medicaid and Medicare laws. The current policy of America First reflects a Hobbesian policy of Me First.

And what of 21st century women? The Women’s March in early 2017 found expression later that same year in the #MeToo movement that began with the multiple accusations of sexual harassment, intimidation and rape against independent movie producer Harvey Weinstein.[3] These types of accusations soon multiplied, identifying such prominent men as artist Chuck Close,[4] actors



The #MeToo movement goes mainstream. *Time* magazine names “the silence breakers” as “person of the year” for 2017.

Kevin Spacey[5] and James Franco,[6] comedian C.K. Louis,[7] federal appeals court judge Alex Kozinski,[8] Congressperson and civil rights activist John Conyers,[9] U.S. Senator and former comedian Al Franken,[10] TV host and commentators Bill O’Reilly[11] and Charlie Rose,[12] and Uber’s chief executive Travis Kalanick.[13] Director Ridley Scott reflected the open revulsion at such behavior when in late 2017 he reshot large portions of *All the Money in the World* (2017) so as to substitute Christopher Plummer for Kevin Spacey.[14] Moreover, the movement went mainstream when *Time* magazine, that had named President Trump as “person of the year” in 2016, named “the silence breakers” women as “person of the year” in 2017.[15] The #MeToo movement has clearly resulted in a long overdue conversation about gender harassment and discrimination in the United States.[16] It has also resulted in the formation of Time’s Up, an organization that seeks to cure through fund raising the problems of the workplace, including “sexual assault, harassment and inequality.”[17]

Yet like Abbie’s insistence on speaking the word “menstruation” following President’s Carter’s “crisis of confidence” speech, there’s also something disconcerting at times about the #MeToo movement. In distinguishing the behavior of such celebrities as Weinstein, C.K. Louis, and Franken, actor Matt Damon observed in an interview:[18]

“I do believe that there’s a spectrum of behavior, right? And we’re going to have to figure — you know, there’s a difference between, you know, patting someone on the butt and rape or child molestation, right? Both of those behaviors need to be confronted and eradicated without question, but they shouldn’t be conflated, right?...

And we live in this culture of outrage and injury, and, you know, that we’re going to have to correct enough to kind of go, ‘Wait a minute. None of us came here perfect.’”

Damon’s comments resulted in a backlash of criticism, including from Minnie Driver, Damon’s ex-girlfriend, who, while initially writing briefly on Facebook,[19] later elaborated:

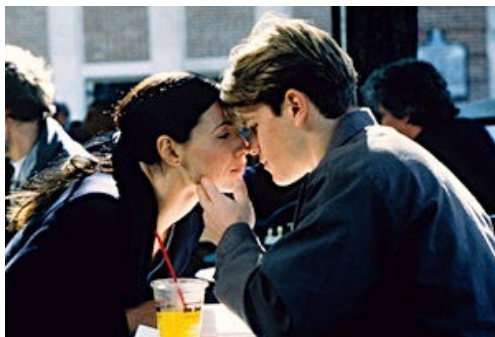
“There is no hierarchy of abuse – that if a woman is raped [it] is much worse than if woman has a penis exposed to her that she didn’t want or ask for ... you cannot tell those women that one is supposed to feel worse than the other.

And it certainly can’t be prescribed by a man. The idea of tone deafness is the idea there [is] no equivalency.

How about: it’s all fucking wrong and it’s all bad, and until you start seeing it under one umbrella it’s not your job to compartmentalise or judge what is worse and what is not. Let women do the speaking up right now. The time right now is for men just to listen and not have an opinion about it for once.”

That view found its reiteration in Hannah Jane Parkinson’s opinion in *The Guardian*:[20]

“This leads me to a simple truth: if one is from a group that has never



Matt Damon and Minnie Driver co-starred in *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and for about a year thereafter were in a relationship. In 2017 Damon speaks in favor of recognizing a “spectrum of behavior” in judging Harvey Weinstein, C.K. Lewis and Al Franken. Driver replies that “there is no hierarchy of abuse” and accuses Damon of

"tone deafness."

been oppressed for reasons of identity, it is almost impossible to understand what that feels like. This often isn't their individual fault, which is where defensiveness comes in, but it is true. Women know, people of colour know, LGBT+ people know, people with disabilities know, those persecuted for their religion know."

I do think certain people should recognise when their voice carries less authority, should know when to shut up, and realise that their voice is not needed, wanted, or helpful at a particular time."

Surely, however, there are differences in degrees of discriminatory or abusive behavior, and those who are not a member of a particular group, howsoever defined, may surely empathize with those who are – and, not incidentally, express that empathy or disagreement with the conclusions reached. Can only persons who have experienced such behavior voice their views? Is the presence of a woman a guarantee that there will be no accusations of sexual harassment,[21] and, as one commentator has observed, "Why is fixing sexism women's work"? [22] Moreover, to the extent that it seeks to exclude "the other" from expressing an opinion, the #MeToo movement comes to resemble the contemporary populist movement insofar as it, too, often excludes the other, though in the name of tribalism.[23] Identity based on exclusion too often serves to fragment culture and results in the empowerment of the few, as evidenced by the growing authoritarianism in the United States.



In 2017 U.S. Senator Franken questions U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, eventually resulting in Sessions' recusal from the investigation over the Trump campaign's contacts with Russian officials. Later accused of sexual harassment and at the insistence of his senate colleagues, Franken resigns from the senate at the end of 2017.

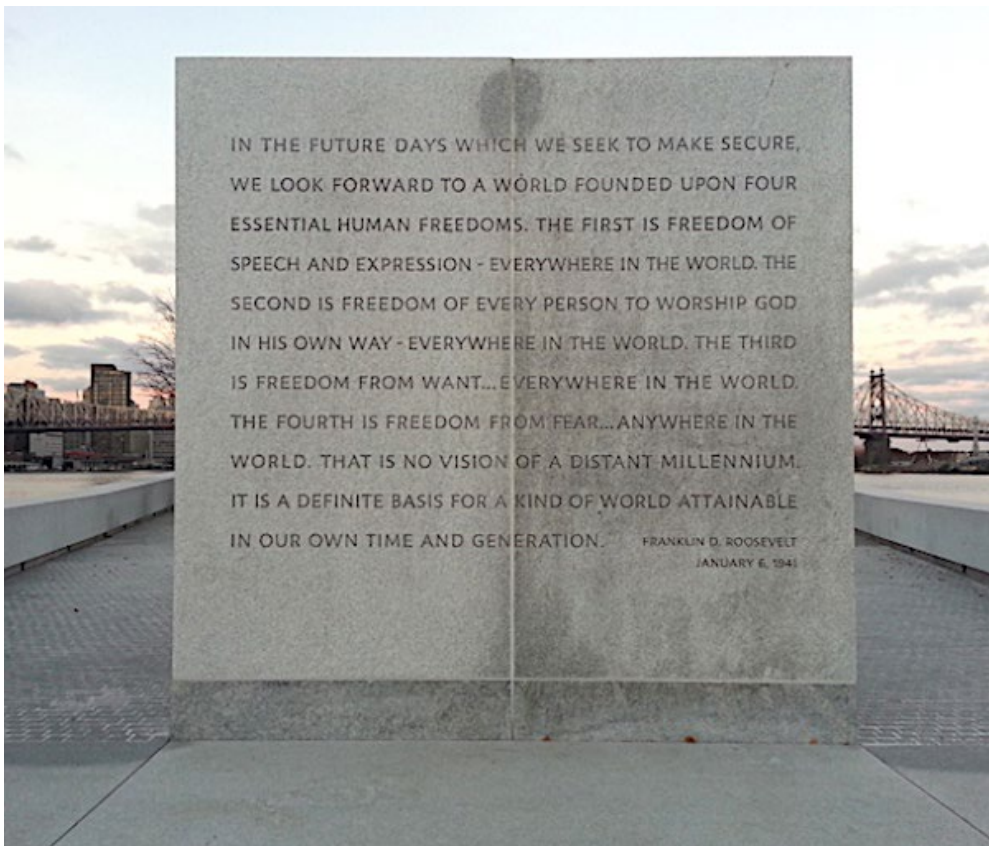
The punishment visited upon the progressive[24] U.S. Senator Franken underscores the effect of this exclusion. [Full disclosure: My family and the Franken family have known each other and been friends since the birth of our daughters.] Following numerous accusations of sexual harassment, including groping, of women[25] and a petition from his fellow senators, who found inadequate the proposed initiation of a senate ethics investigation and instead requested his immediate voluntary resignation from the senate, Franken resigned. [26] U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand led the call for his resignation, stating at a news conference:

"Enough is enough. We need to draw a line in the sand and say none of it is okay, none of it is acceptable." [27]

She also elaborated on Facebook:

“I have spent a lot of time reflecting on Senator Franken’s behavior... The women who have come forward are brave and I believe them. While it’s true that his behavior is not the same as the criminal conduct alleged against Roy Moore, or Harvey Weinstein, or President Trump, it is still unquestionably wrong.... We should not have to be explaining the gradations between sexual assault, harassment and unwelcome groping.....[28]

Drawing a “line in the sand” represents a scorched earth approach that recognizes no differences in behavior and takes no prisoners. Indeed, Franken’s critics uniformly joined in sacrificing his otherwise progressive politics in order to advocate for the moral high ground and, not incidentally, thereby advance partisan politics. “I’m sorry about Al Franken, but still — savor the moment.”[29] In this rush to judgment few progressive women reiterated Damon’s cautionary note other than (at least initially) law professor (and one time political candidate) Zephyr Teachout, who wrote, “Zero tolerance should go hand in hand with two other things: due process and proportionality.” Democracy surely requires that we not act collectively like Internet trolls. “As citizens, we need a way to make sense of accusations that does not depend only on what we read or see in the news or on social media.”[30] As journalist Susan Faludi also observed, defeating a patriarch, such as Weinstein, is not the same as defeating patriarchy and punishing male malfeasance is not the equivalent of achieving gender equality.[31] Gender discrimination and sexual harassment are reflective of a broader cultural paradigm, namely capitalism, an inhuman system whose primary values of money and property define its hierarchy of power and control.[32] It is the need to reverse that ever-expanding historical curve of inhumanity that should be common to all progressives, regardless of the group (or groups) to which each person may belong.[33]



The Four Freedoms Monument on Roosevelt Island, N.Y.C., reiterates the four freedoms that President Roosevelt had articulated in his 1941 State of the Union address. His words underscore the historical sea-change in U.S. ideals.

Abbie in *20th Century Women* rightly insists upon our need to speak the word “menstruation,” but in doing so she also engages in a form of class discrimination. In a comment not scripted, Greta Gerwig as Abbie condescends at the dinner table to the working-class William, criticizing him for raising what she perceives as a “slightly off topic” comment when he observes,

“Sex during menstruation can be very pleasurable for a woman. It can even relieve some of the cramps. Jamie, I also want to say, never have sex with just the vagina, have sex with the whole woman.”

This entire scene, which is largely improvised and far exceeds in length the scripted scene, underscores Abbie’s insistence that the personal is political. Abbie inevitably misses, however, the historical shift, as expressed in Carter’s “crisis of confidence” speech, that began in the mid-1970s and is today worsening as we continue to move from a communal to an individualist culture, a culture that enslaves even as we supposedly achieve equality in our individual right to acquire ever more useless stuff. That historical arc will continue if we collectively fail not only to perceive that the political is personal but also to act upon a communal vision of a common humanity. Albeit in different ways and degrees, intersectionality defines each of us.

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Postscript notes

1. For example, the new law repealed tax incentives for employees using public transportation, and this change most affects those voters in urban areas, which had largely voted against Donald Trump. Likewise, the effective repeal of the state and local tax deduction is also aimed largely at those same states, since those states have historically relied heavily upon state and local taxes to fund their more extensive social programs. Of course, too, the Act advanced the special interests of its supporters, such as several tax amendments that benefited only the real estate industry and a specific provision that authorizes renewed drilling for oil in the state of Alaska. [[return to text](#)]

2. Jason Noble, “Despite lawmakers’ warnings, few Iowa farmers face estate tax,” *The Des Moines Register*, Dec 2, 2017, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2017/12/02/tax-reform-iowa-farmers-estate-tax/906946001/> (interview of Iowa U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley). As Noble pointed out in his article, “by this logic...Trump’s children are more socially useful than anyone irresponsible enough to live paycheck to paycheck.”

3. For the earliest reports on the Weinstein revelations, see Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>; and Ronan Farrow, “From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein’s Accusers Tell Their Stories,” *The New Yorker*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>.

4. Sarah Cascone, “National Gallery Cancels Chuck Close and Thomas Roma Shows Over Allegations of Sexual Misconduct,” *Artnet News*, January 26, 2018, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/national-gallery-chuck-close-thomas-roma-1208231?utm_content=from_&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=US%20newsletter%20for%201/26/18&utm_term=New%20US%20Newsletter%20List; and Robin Pogrebin, “Chuck Close Apologizes After Accusations of Sexual Harassment,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/arts/design/chuck-close-sexual-harassment.html>.

5. Maria Puente, “Kevin Spacey scandal: A complete list of the 15 accusers,” *USA Today*, November 7 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2017/11/07/kevin-spacey-scandal-complete-list-13-accusers/835739001/>.

6. Dave Izkoff, “Women’s Accusations Follow James Franco After Golden Globes,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/movies/james-franco-allegations.html?ref=todayspaper>.

7. Louis C.K., “Louis C.K. Responds to Accusations: ‘These Stories Are True,’” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/television/louis-ck-statement.html?_r=0.

8. Matt Zapotosky, “Federal appeals judge announces immediate retirement amid

- probe of sexual misconduct allegations,” *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/federal-appeals-judge-announces-immediate-retirement-amid-investigation-prompted-by-accusations-of-sexual-misconduct/2017/12/18/6e38ada4-e3fd-11e7-a65d-1ac0fd7f097e_story.html?utm_term=.bbbc23dc6b12.
9. Yamiche Alcindor, “John Conyers to Leave Congress Amid Harassment Claims,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/us/politics/john-conyers-election.html>.
10. Elana Schor and Seung Min Kim, “Franken resigns. The Minnesota Democrat will step down from the Senate within weeks after multiple claims of groping and unwanted sexual advances.” *Politico*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/12/07/franken-resigns-285957>.
11. Emily Steel and Michael S. Schmidt “Bill O’Reilly Settled New Harassment Claim, Then Fox Renewed His Contract,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/21/business/media/bill-oreilly-sexual-harassment.html>.
12. John Koblin and Michael M. Grynbaum, “Charlie Rose Fired by CBS and PBS After Harassment Allegations,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/21/business/media/charlie-rose-fired-cbs.html>.
13. Mike Isaac, “Uber Founder Travis Kalanick Resigns as C.E.O.”, *The New York Times*, June 21 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/technology/uber-ceo-travis-kalanick.html>. This is hardly an exhaustive list. Moreover, the movement has also renewed focus on those previously accused of harassment, such as former U.S. President Bill Clinton and actor Woody Allen.
14. While arguably Scott benefited commercially from this well-publicized reshoot, the reshoot itself later became the subject of some controversy when it was reported that one of the film’s male leads, Mark Wahlberg, had received \$1.5 million in additional compensation while the female lead, Michelle Williams, received only a nominal payment for this reshooting. Alyssa Rosenberg, “Why did Michelle Williams sacrifice fair pay to replace a predator?” *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2018/01/11/why-did-michelle-williams-sacrifice-fair-pay-to-replace-a-predator/?utm_term=.156ff48697f3. Wahlberg eventually donated that money in Michelle Williams’ name to “Times Up,” the recently formed defense fund created to fight discrimination and harassment of women in the workplace. Jeffrey Mays, “Mark Wahlberg and Agency Will Donate \$2 Million to Time’s Up After Outcry Over Pay,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/13/arts/mark-wahlberg-michelle-williams.html?ref=todayspaper>.
15. Stephanie Zacharek, Eliana Dockterman and Haley Sweetland Edwards “The Silence Breakers,” *Time*, December 18, 2017, <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>. The five women depicted on the cover are actress Ashley Judd, singer Taylor Swift, Uber engineer Susan Fowler, lobbyist Adama Iwu, and strawberry picker Isabel Pascual.
16. “The Conversation: Seven Women Discuss Work, Fairness, Sex and Ambition,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/magazine/the-conversation-seven-women-discuss-work-fairness-sex-and-ambition.html>.
17. Megan Garber, “Is This the Next Step for the #MeToo Movement?,” *The*

Atlantic, January 2, 2018,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/01/beyond-metoo-can-times-up-effect-real-change/549482/>; Time's Up, Letter of Solidarity for Legal Defense Fund, January 1, 2018, <https://www.timesupnow.com/>.

18. Alexa Valiente and Angela Williams, "Matt Damon opens up about Harvey Weinstein, sexual harassment and confidentiality agreements," *ABC News*, December 14, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/matt-damon-opens-harvey-weinstein-sexual-harassment-confidentiality/story?id=51792548>.

19. Edward Helmore, "Minnie Driver: men like Matt Damon 'cannot understand what abuse is like,'" *The Guardian*, December 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/dec/16/minnie-driver-matt-damon-men-cannot-understand-abuse>. Driver wrote on Facebook:

"Gosh it's so interesting (profoundly unsurprising) how men with all these opinions about women's differentiation between sexual misconduct, assault and rape reveal themselves to be utterly tone deaf and as a result, systemically part of the problem."

20. Hannah Jane Parkinson, "Matt Damon, stop #damonsplaining. You don't understand sexual harassment," *The Guardian*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/19/matt-damon-sexual-harassment>.

21. Such accusations have included instances of the sexual harassment of a woman by a man, Maggie Haberman and Amy Choick, "Hillary Clinton Chose to Shield a Top Adviser Accused of Harassment in 2008," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/us/politics/hillary-clinton-chose-to-shield-a-top-adviser-accused-of-harassment-in-2008.html> and of a man by a woman, Derek Hawkins, "Female California lawmaker behind #MeToo push is accused of groping male staffer," *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/02/09/california-lawmaker-behind-metoo-push-is-accused-of-groping-male-staffer/?undefined=&utm_term=.6908a960df13&wpisrc=nl_most&wpmm=1.

22. Linda West, "Why Is Fixing Sexism Women's Work?" *The New York Times*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/03/opinion/why-is-fixing-sexism-womens-work.html?ref=todayspaper>. West concludes:

"Sexism is a male invention. White supremacy is a white invention. Transphobia is a cisgender invention. So far, men have treated #MeToo like a bumbling dad in a detergent commercial: well-intentioned but floundering, as though they are not the experts. They have a chance to do better by Time's Up.

Only 2.6 percent of construction workers are female. We did not install this glass ceiling, and it is not our responsibility to demolish it."

23. The argument that those outside of a defined group should keep silent has been applied to other groups. For example, black artists called in March 2017 for the removal from the Whitney Biennial (or possibly the destruction of) "Open Casket," white artist Dana Schutz's painting based on the celebrated photographs of Emmett Till's mutilated corpse. Randy Kennedy, "White Artist's Painting of Emmett Till at Whitney Biennial Draws Protests," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/arts/design/painting-of-emmett-till-at-whitney-biennial-draws-protests.html>.

Identity by exclusion is, of course, a longstanding — and often suspect —

tradition. For example, the Nazis barred Jews from teaching in German universities based on their claim that non-Aryan Jews could not sufficiently understand Aryans. Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss*, (London: Verso, 2016), 194

24. An example of Franken's progressive bona fides may be found in Susan Crawford, *Captive Audience: The Telecom Industry and Monopoly Power in the New Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 206. Other examples have included Franken's support of a single-payer health system, Rachel Rouben, Peter Sullivan and Nathaniel Weixel, "Where Dems stand on Sanders's single-payer bill," *The Hill*, September 12, 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/350284-where-dems-stand-on-sanderss-single-payer-bill>, his sponsorship of a law that would have barred mandatory arbitration in employment, consumer, antitrust, or civil rights disputes, S. 1133 (114th): Arbitration Fairness Act of 2015, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/s1133>, and his repeated objection to invasions of privacy by tech companies, e.g., Craig Timberg "This lawmaker wants Apple to explain how iPhone X will protect the privacy of your face," *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2017/09/13/this-lawmaker-wants-apple-to-explain-how-iphone-x-will-protect-the-privacy-of-your-face/?utm_term=.c4540e110e3f.

25. Kenneth P Vogel in "Partisans, Wielding Money, Begin Seeking to Exploit Harassment Claims," *The New York Times*, December 31, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/31/us/politics/sexual-harassment-politics-partisanship.html?ref=todayspaper>, writes of how money from both the right and the left has sometimes targeted selected politicians and observes, in particular, the possible partisan politics in the initial impetus for the accusations against Franken:

"Some Democrats have ascribed political motivation to sexual harassment claims against their politicians as well, including those that led to the resignation of Senator Al Franken of Minnesota. His defenders point out that Mr. Franken's initial accuser, Leeann Tweeden, had appeared as a semiregular guest on the Fox News Channel show hosted by Sean Hannity, a confidant of Mr. Trump.

Fueling Democratic suspicions was a Twitter message linked to a Trump political adviser, Roger Stone, that surfaced hours before Ms. Tweeden's initial charges: 'Roger Stone says it's Al Franken's "time in the barrel". Franken next in long list of Democrats to be accused of "grabby" behavior.'

Mr. Stone has said he 'had no hand in it at all,' but was tipped off by a source 'within the Fox network' that the allegation was coming."

26. Franken's resignation speech may be found at "Full Video and Transcript: Al Franken Announces Resignation from Senate," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/07/us/politics/video-transcript-al-franken-resignation-senate.html>.

27. Elise Viebeck, Ed O'Keefe and Karen Tumulty, "As accusations continue to mount, Senate Democrats tell Franken to resign," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/as-accusations-continue-to-mount-senate-democrats-tell-franken-to-resign/2017/12/06/fd23fcda-dabb-11e7-b859-fb0995360725_story.html?utm_term=.2cad93ce4ac8.

28. Kirsten Gillibrand, Facebook, December 6, 2017, <https://www.facebook>.

[com/KirstenGillibrand/posts/10155471770513411](https://www.nytimes.com/KirstenGillibrand/posts/10155471770513411).

While beyond the scope of this postscript, it is not clear the extent to which politics played a role in Gillibrand's insistence that Franken resign. Gillibrand may be running for president in 2020 and, as such, arguably benefits from the #MeToo movement and Franken's resignation, in particular. See, Gina Bellafante, "Kirsten Gillibrand and the Whiplash of #MeToo," *The New York Times*, December 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/14/nyregion/kirsten-gillibrand-and-the-whiplash-of-metoo.html>; Shane Goldmacher and Matt Flegenheimer, "Kirsten Gillibrand, Long a Champion of Women, Finds the Nation Joining Her," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/us/politics/senator-kirsten-gillibrand-trump-women-sexual-harassment.html>; Ashley Parker, John Wagner and Ed O'Keefe, "Trump attacks Gillibrand in tweet critics say is sexually suggestive and demeaning," *The Washington Post*, December 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/12/12/trump-sends-sexually-suggestive-and-demeaning-tweet-about-gillibrand/?utm_term=.7d5913dd451d.

29. Gail Collins, "The Great Al Franken Moment," *The New York Times*, December 8 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/08/opinion/al-franken-sexual-harassment.html>; Kathleen Parker, "Al Franken, martyr," *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/al-franken-is-a-martyr/2017/12/08/425f6ee8-dc5a-11e7-b1a8-62589434a581_story.html?utm_term=.91e2fd91d2fo; Editorial Board, "Al Franken's departure is a welcome sign," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/al-frankens-departure-is-a-welcome-sign/2017/12/07/5375dbf6-db90-11e7-b1a8-62589434a581_story.html?utm_term=.e9dcob21ab1b; Editorial Board, "What Congress Can Learn from Al Franken," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/07/opinion/congress-franken-democrats.html>.

30. Zephyr Teachout, "I'm Not Convinced Franken Should Quit," *The New York Times*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/11/opinion/franken-resignation-harassment-democrats.html>. Teachout opened her op-ed with the following observation:

"I care passionately about #MeToo. Women are routinely demeaned, dismissed, discouraged and assaulted. Too many women's careers are stymied or ended because of harassment and abuse. In politics, where I have worked much of my adult life, this behavior is rampant.

I also believe in zero tolerance. And yet, a lot of women I know — myself included — were left with a sense that something went wrong last week with the effective ouster of Al Franken from the United States Senate. He resigned after a groundswell of his own Democratic colleagues called for him to step down.

Zero tolerance should go hand in hand with two other things: due process and proportionality."

Teachout is not alone in her discomfort.

"It goes without saying that no one is coming to the defense of heinous sorts, like Kevin Spacey and Matt Lauer. But the trickle-down effect to cases like those of Garrison Keillor, Jonathan Schwartz, Ryan Lizza and Al Franken, in which the accusations are scattered, anonymous or, as far as the public knows, very vague and unspecific, has been troubling."

Daphne Merkin, “Publicly, We Say #MeToo. Privately, We Have Misgivings.” *The New York Times*, January 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/golden-globes-metoo.html?ref=todayspaper>. See also Shira A Scheindlin and Joel Cohen, “After #MeToo, we can't ditch due process,” *The Guardian*, January 8, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/08/metoo-due-process-televisions?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+USA+-+Collections+2017&utm_term=259736&subid=7931573&CMP=GT_US_collection in which the authors, in noting how “public conversation has largely been advanced through the press and social media,” observe,

“Rushing to judgment without due process defies core values that Americans hold dear. Everybody should have the opportunity to state their case, whether a victim or an alleged perpetrator. The flip side – quietly sweeping a scandal under the rug – is equally offensive.”

Commentator Bill Maher humorously mocked #MeToo as lacking common sense in its failure to recognize gradations of behavior and compared the movement to the political right's proposed “alternative facts”. “Maher: #MeToo Becoming #McCarthyism, The Nothing Is Funny People' Trying To Take Over World,” *RealClear Politics*, January 20 2018, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/01/20/maher_metoo_mccarthyism_the_nothing_is_funny_people_trying_to_take_over_world.html.

And Canadian author Margaret Atwood articulated the issue as follows:

“I believe that in order to have civil and human rights for women there have to be civil and human rights, period, including the right to fundamental justice, just as for women to have the vote, there has to be a vote. Do Good Feminists believe that only women should have such rights? Surely not. That would be to flip the coin on the old state of affairs in which only men had such rights.

The #MeToo moment is a symptom of a broken legal system. All too frequently, women and other sexual-abuse complainants couldn't get a fair hearing through institutions – including corporate structures – so they used a new tool: the internet. Stars fell from the skies. This has been very effective, and has been seen as a massive wake-up call. But what next? The legal system can be fixed, or our society could dispose of it. Institutions, corporations and workplaces can houseclean, or they can expect more stars to fall, and also a lot of asteroids.

If the legal system is bypassed because it is seen as ineffectual, what will take its place? Who will be the new power brokers?”

Margaret Atwood, “Am I a bad feminist?” *The Globe and Mail*, January 13, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/am-i-a-bad-feminist/article37591823/>.

Not surprisingly, those who have spoken out about the need for due process, such as Atwood, have sometimes suffered a social media backlash. Ashifa Kassam, “Margaret Atwood faces feminist backlash on social media over #MeToo,” *The Guardian*, January 15, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/15/margaret-atwood-feminist-backlash-metoo?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+USA+-+Collections+2017&utm_term=260620&subid

=7931573&CMP=GT_US_collection. In contrast to Atwood, those wholly supporting the methods of the #MeToo movement have sometimes argue that the ends justify its means, presumably even if that results in the subversion of legal principles, such as due process.

“Powerful individuals and entities are taking sexual abuse seriously for once and acting against it as never before. No longer liars, no longer worthless, today’s survivors are initiating consequences none of them could have gotten through any lawsuit — in part because the laws do not permit relief against individual perpetrators, but more because they are being believed and valued as the law seldom has. Women have been saying these things forever. It is the response to them that has changed.”

Catharine MacKinnon, “#MeToo Has Done What the Law Could Not,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/opinion/metoo-law-legal-system.html?ref=todayspaper>.

Of course, too, the insistence upon due process can also mask virulent sexism. Jill Filipovic, “The White House cries crocodile tears over ‘due process’” (“The concept of ‘innocent until proven guilty’ only matters to men like Trump when the accused are his white male friends alleged to have abused women.”), *The Guardian*, February 13, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/13/white-house-rob-porter-due-process?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+USA+-+Collections+2017&utm_term=.263891&subid=7931573&CMP=GT_US_collection.

31. Susan Faludi, “The Patriarchs Are Falling. The Patriarchy Is Stronger Than Ever.” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/28/opinion/sunday/patriarchy-feminism-metoo.html?ref=todayspaper>. Faludi writes at length on this distinction:

“Surely the results of the #MeToo phenomenon are worthy. It’s a seriously good thing Harvey Weinstein is gone and that the potential Harvey Weinsteins will think twice or thrice or a thousand times before harassing women whose fortunes they control. But “the end of patriarchy”? Look around.

This month, President Trump signed into law a tax bill that throws a bomb at women. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act systematically guts benefits that support women who need support the most: It means an end to personal and dependent exemptions (a disaster for minimum-wage workers, nearly two-thirds of whom are women). An expiration date for child-care tax credits and a denial of such credits for immigrant children without Social Security cards. An end to the Affordable Care Act’s individual mandate. And, barely avoided, thanks to Democrats’ objections: an enshrinement of “fetal personhood” in the form of college savings accounts for unborn children, a sly grenade lobbed at legal abortion.

Not to mention that Republican congressmen plan to pay down the enormous federal deficit the bill will incur by slashing entitlements that, again, are critical to women: Medicaid (covering nearly half the births in the nation and 75 percent of family planning), Medicare (more than half of beneficiaries 65 and older — and two-thirds of those 85 and older — are women) and so on.

The challenge today is the one faced by [Susan B.] Anthony and

[Elizabeth] Willard: how to bring the outrage over male malfeasance to bear on the more far-reaching campaign for women's equality. Too often, the world's attention seems to have room for only the first.

That paradigm shift will be critical to winning the coming battles for women's rights: health insurance, pay equity, family planning, sexual assault, and more. The peril is that activist women won't transcend the divide. In which case, #MeToo will continue to topple patriarchs, while the patriarchy continues to win the day."

32. That Kevin Spacey allegedly abused sexually numerous men in the entertainment field and that the celebrated photographers Mario Testino and Bruce Weber likewise sexually exploited male models in the fashion industry, Jacob Bernstein, Matthew Schneier and Vanessa Friedman, "Male Models Say Mario Testino and Bruce Weber Sexually Exploited Them," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/13/style/mario-testino-bruce-weber-harassment.html?ref=todayspaper>, suggests how sexual abuse is part of a larger, cultural problem.

33. The #MeToo movement has divided women, exemplified by the letter signed by, among others, French actor Catherine Deneuve. Valeriya Safronova, "Catherine Deneuve and Others Denounce the #MeToo Movement," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/09/movies/catherine-deneuve-and-others-denounce-the-metoo-movement.html?ref=todayspaper>; and Aurelien Breeden and Elian Peltier, "Response to French Letter Denouncing #MeToo Shows a Sharp Divide," *The New York Times*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/world/europe/france-sexual-harassment.html?ref=todayspaper>. The full text of that letter can be found in translation at http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html#meter_toaster. Deneuve later, in part, clarified and apologized for the letter that she'd signed. Anna Codrea-Rado, "Catherine Deneuve Apologizes to Victims after Denouncing #MeToo," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/15/arts/catherine-deneuve-too.html?ref=todayspaper>.

Some commentators have framed this division as a generational divide. Jessica Bennett, "The #MeToo Moment: Parsing the Generational Divide," *The New York Times*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/us/the-metoo-moment-parsing-the-generational-divide.html>; and Catherine Bennett, "When feminists insult each other, chauvinists cheer. There is no pride to be taken in dismissing conflicting opinions with ageist insults," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/28/when-feminists-insult-each-other-chauvinists-cheer?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+USA++Collections+2017&utm_term=262182&subid=7931573&CMP=GT_US_collection.



13th and the culture of surplus punishment

by [Victor Wallis](#)



Chain gang.

Ava DuVernay undertook the documentary *13th* in order to explore and bring attention to the Prison Industrial Complex.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The film's title refers to the 1865 amendment to the U.S. constitution, in which slavery was abolished "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." The story told by *13th* thus goes back to the early chain-gangs of black prisoners – men arrested for petty offenses under the post-Civil War Black Codes who were then contracted out to perform labor that they had previously performed as privately-owned slaves. Now they were under state control, but they still worked for no pay.



Civil rights demonstrator.

Images of 19th-century chain-gangs appear at both the beginning and the end of the film. In between, we are presented with archival clips and commentary reflecting the history of black oppression in the United States from the time of the 13th amendment right up to the present. What the film most directly brings out is the deadly continuity of the oppressive practices – ranging from disenfranchisement to lynchings to police attacks – across superficially distinct historical periods. What it encourages us to reflect on, beyond this, is the degree to which the structures of oppression have effects that go far beyond their immediate victims. This global impact of the Prison Industrial Complex is suggested in the clip that we see from a 1980 speech by right-wing strategist Paul Weyrich, where he articulates in six words what has remained to this day a central though rarely acknowledged tactic of the system of domination: "I don't *want* everybody to vote." [2]



Kalief Browder fleeing guards at Rikers Island.

13th is certainly a film that everyone should see – especially that whole vast sector of the U.S. population which, whether through prejudice or inertia or media-fostered ignorance, self-righteously refuses to look at anything that might dislodge its fiercely worn ideological blinders. With racist assertions no longer officially acceptable in the United States, we all need to be reminded – as we are by *13th* – of the ways in which racist practice continues to permeate political life. An especially effective passage in the film is where it cuts back and forth between scenes of aggression at a 2016 Trump campaign rally – stoked by the future president himself – and scenes from the 1950s of violence inflicted by police and vigilantes against black people.

The whole history persuasively frames the present-day embodiment of the United States’ “peculiar institution,” namely mass incarceration, which entombs 1 in 3 black men at some point in their lives.[3] Ironically, however, what the film does not take up at all is the literal perpetuation of slavery in today’s prison system. In fact, the demand to repeal the 13th amendment’s “exception clause” – to amend the amendment – is at the core of a current nationwide movement of prisoners against being forced to work for next to nothing or, in the case of Texas, nothing at all.[4] Also not highlighted in the film is the systematic application of surplus punishment, including physical abuse, medical neglect, and psychological torture. Although we are shown the horrendous treatment of Kalief Browder – a youth who was falsely charged and never tried – on NYC’s Rikers Island, we are not told about the nationwide web of “supermax” facilities, or about the widespread use of sensory deprivation and prolonged solitary confinement. We shall come back to this.

The single word that summarizes the film’s narrative is *criminalization*. Criminalization serves to confer legitimacy on all the inequities and indignities that the system perpetrates on people of color. The practices are then rationalized as being aimed not against a particular ethnicity but rather against a category of persons – implicitly unworthy – who have rejected the norms of civilized society. The suffering endured by such “criminals” is presumed to flow directly from their own misdeeds, and therefore not to merit any concern on the part of “law-abiding” citizens.

The stereotyping of prisoners as criminals – or “offenders,” in the official lingo – makes it possible for many of us to unthinkingly accept the preposterous idea that, within the space of a generation, there could have occurred a sudden quintupling of an identifiable character-type within a given society – to wit, a surge of “criminals” in the United States that suddenly arose starting in the mid-1970s. In fact, the ballooning of the U.S. prison population reflects key measures taken by the government to address a systemic crisis.



Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*.

Political protest was at a peak in 1969 when Richard Nixon became president. The Black Panther Party (BPP) was rapidly expanding, and was tagged by the FBI as the “greatest threat to national security.” Eager to suppress the black revolt but no longer able to target people on the basis of “race,” Nixon instead invoked the specter of crime. State agencies, acting either directly or through surrogates, could assassinate the most inspirational black leaders (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Chicago BPP leader Fred Hampton), and could frame and lock up many others, but this was not enough to assure pacification of their popular base. Here is where the “war on drugs” came in. It subjected street-transactions to the same level of surveillance and manipulation as had previously been deployed against revolutionary organizations like the BPP.[5]

Legislation passed under Presidents Reagan, Bush I, and Clinton lengthened sentences for even minor drug-related offenses, and also made it harder for

criminal defendants to appeal from state to federal courts. At the same time, the lure of the illegal drug trade was augmented as neoliberal economic policies – including corporate globalization, deindustrialization, and the attack on welfare – cut into working-class job-opportunities and incomes. From the standpoint of capital's need for a labor force, there were more hands available than necessary. Welfare had to be undercut because it made the unemployed less vulnerable. With well-paying jobs gone, with welfare gutted, and with the resultant volatile populations, a higher level of control was seen as necessary. Hence the disproportionate presence of police in poor neighborhoods, especially those whose inhabitants share a common culture and therefore a potential for effective resistance. Hence also the over-representation of those communities in the prisons, whose primary function is to warehouse what from a capitalist perspective is surplus population.



"Processing" prisoners.

In this general structure of control, prisons stand at the apex. The “offender” label is thrown into question, however, by the overwhelming preponderance of plea-bargaining – as opposed to conviction at trial – in determining prison sentences. Bronx Democrat Charles Rangel, interviewed in *13th*, says that plea bargains determine the outcome in 97% of criminal cases. This refers to the federal level, but state practices run in the same range.[6] Yet even a relatively short prison term amounts to many more years of punishment. This is because of laws – or policies of private corporate entities – that are unrelated to the legal sentence for a given offense. Ex-prisoners are thus subject to being denied employment opportunities, student loans, food stamps, access to public housing, and, crucially, the right to vote. Many of these hardships vary by state or locality, but the disenfranchisement is estimated to extend nationally to about 6 million potential voters, overwhelmingly people of color.



"Administering" an arrest.

This aspect of surplus punishment is noted in *13th*. Another aspect that should not be forgotten is the impact on prisoners' households, whose members are also punished both materially and psychologically by the incarceration of their loved ones. But the most glaring expression of surplus punishment is the abuse of the prisoners themselves. Of course, the incidence and the severity of such abuse varies by state, by institution, and with immediate contingencies. But there is an enabling ideology and a corresponding staff-culture which gives rise to common and widespread practices. There is moreover a continuum between these practices and the harder-to-conceal practices of the police, operating in neighborhoods whose populations they seek to keep in line. Guards and police are alike in functioning as occupation forces, and have no accountability to those whose lives they oversee. Where stop-and-frisk laws are in effect, police have the same arbitrary power as prison guards. But even without such laws, there are countless petty rules that can serve as pretexts for detaining someone, and once the detention has been made, the cop is in control, and for a person of color to challenge that control is to run a mortal risk.[7]

The point here is that the very mindset that gives police the license to kill gratuitously – i.e., even when they are clearly in no danger – also tells prison officials that they are entitled to inflict both physical and psychological torture on the people in their custody. At the higher levels of power, this is rationalized in terms of what is allegedly required for the sake of maintaining order; at the lower levels of implementation, i.e., in the conduct of prison guards, it takes the more direct form of finding satisfaction in subjugating those over whom they have been given total control.[8]

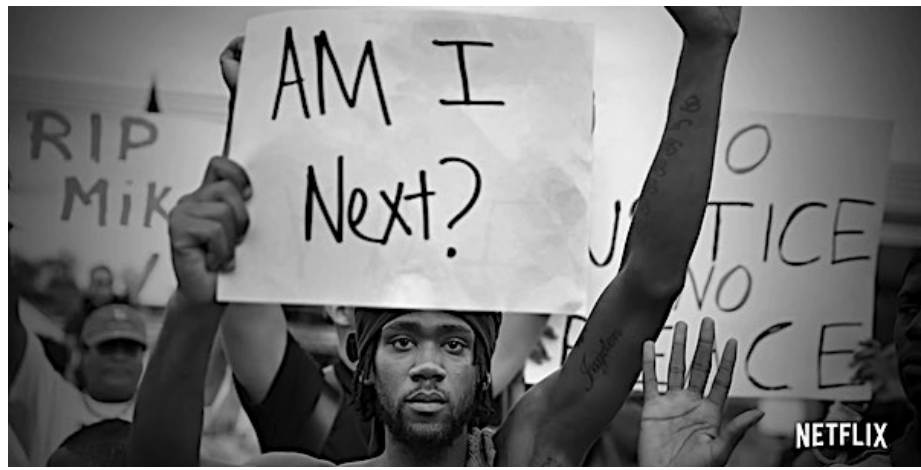
Accounts of such behavior occasionally penetrate media indifference, as in the case of a mentally ill prisoner in Florida who in 2012 was scalded to death – locked for two hours in a steaming shower by guards who then ignored his cries. [9] Cases of beatings, of deliberate medical neglect, and of destruction of prisoners’ property – in various states – are too numerous to itemize.[10] Equally widespread is the practice of long-term solitary confinement, imposed especially on organizers. Forty-four states have supermax prisons, in which solitary confinement is the norm.[11]

New repressive practices are continuously introduced. Although they are not all equally severe, they point in a consistent direction. In one New York State prison, an additional wall was put up, a few years ago, just outside the window of the visiting room, exclusively in order to block one’s view of the hills in the distance. In Virginia, the visiting system was recently reorganized so that you are no longer put on a visiting list by each prisoner you might visit, but you instead have to apply for visiting status on the system-wide website, which, except in the case of family-members, only allows you to visit one prisoner in the state. In many local jails, it is now becoming common to allow visits only via video – an arrangement that institutions find attractive because it saves staff time while also providing, like the notorious prison-phone system, an opportunity to extort payment from visitors (most of whom, like their brothers and sisters behind the walls, come from poverty).[12] Common to all such steps is the further isolation of prisoners from normal life, whether in the form of contact with family and friends or in the form simply of visual variety in one’s surroundings.

While the topic of mass incarceration is ably introduced by *13th*, we begin to see the full impact of the phenomenon only when we recognize that the people it ensnares are not just locked up for a certain period of time; they are continuously subjected to additional punishment, which not only makes their confinement more painful, but also extends itself, for those who are fortunate enough to be released, far into the rest of their lives.

Behind this whole constellation of practices lies a self-perpetuating culture of mistrust. The culture in question is not, of course, embraced by everyone, but it is reinforced at the highest levels. It is integrally tied to the extreme social inequality that has arisen in the United States. And it is expressed on the global stage by the argument that in order for “us” – a deliberately unspecified entity – to be secure in the world, “we” must have a bigger arsenal of weapons than all the other military powers combined. This perversion of the concept of security – lumping popular needs with capitalist interests – appears consistently whether we’re examining the worldwide network of U.S. military bases or the domestic mechanisms through which the potentially most rebellious sectors of the population are kept under control.

The priority given to exercising control reflects an underlying antagonism of interests. The overgrowth of the U.S. penal system, in turn, reflects the failure of the country’s political structures to restrain even the most draconian of ruling-class impositions. The resulting prison climate of suspicion, tension, and periodic outbursts should be assessed in the light of an alternative model. The segment on Norwegian prisons in Michael Moore’s 2015 documentary, *Where to Invade Next*, offers both the evidence and the argument for an approach which says that confinement is punishment enough, and that beyond that, the focus should be on rehabilitation. To anyone who thinks that this approach is unrealistic, the only possible reply is: this shows how deeply the culture of domination has entrenched itself in our society.



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Notes

1. She says this to Oprah Winfrey in an interview that accompanies the film.
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2. The racial dimension of voter-suppression is expertly illuminated by journalist Greg Palast. See his 2016 book and dvd, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*.
<http://www.gregpalast.com/>
3. Report of The Sentencing Project to the United Nations Human Rights Committee Regarding Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System, August 2013 (<http://sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Race-and-Justice-Shadow-Report-ICCPR.pdf>), p. 1.
4. See Alice Spier, "The Largest Prison Strike in U.S. History Enters Its Second Week,"
<https://theintercept.com/2016/09/16/the-largest-prison-strike-in-u-s-history-enters-its-second-week/> Abolition of prison-slavery is a central demand of the "millions4prisoners" march planned for August 19, 2017.
5. Michelle Alexander, who is extensively interviewed in *13th*, describes how Nixon hatched the war on drugs, in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012), pp. 40ff. The political agenda underlying the drug war is discussed in Mumia Abu-Jamal and Johanna Fernández, eds., *The Roots of Mass Incarceration: Locking up Black Dissidents and Punishing the Poor*, special issue of *Socialism and Democracy* (November 2014), <http://sdonline.org/back-issues/#66>
6. Jed S. Rakoff, "Why Innocent People Plead Guilty," *New York Review of Books*, November 20, 2014,
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/11/20/why-innocent-people-plead-guilty/>
7. Steve Martinot, "Probing the Epidemic of Police Murders," *Socialism and Democracy* (March 2013), <http://sdonline.org/back-issues/#61/>
8. See Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, "The Abuse Goes On: The Corrupting Dynamics of Power in a Texas Prison" (2017), <http://rashidmod.com/?p=2374> Regarding the assumption that extreme methods must be used to maintain order, see the extraordinary memoir by Jamie Bissonette et al., *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2008).
9. Report in *Miami Herald*, June 25, 2014,
<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article1972693.html> An official investigation concluded in 2017 that no charges should be brought against the responsible officers.
<https://diy.rootsofaction.org/petitions/darren-rainey-was-tortured-and-killed-by-prison-guards-at-dade-correctional-institution-in-florida>

10. For reports by Kevin “Rashid” Johnson, see http://rashidmod.com/?page_id=166 For reports by Keith “Malik” Washington, a leader of the anti-slavery drive, see <http://sfbayview.com/?s=keith+malik+washington>

11. Albert Woodfox, recently released from Angola Prison in Louisiana, was held in solitary for 43+ years. Kevin “Rashid” Johnson has been in solitary, in four different state systems, for most of his 25+ years of incarceration. For a brief overview of the practice, which routinely victimizes over 80,000 prisoners in the US, see <http://solitarywatch.com/facts/faq/>

12. National Public Radio report (2016), <http://www.npr.org/2016/12/05/504458311/video-calls-replace-in-person-visits-in-some-jails>

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Obama, Trump, and the politics of an ape planet

by [Penelope Ingram](#)

“What planet have I landed on? Did I slip through a wormhole in the middle of the night and this looks like America? It’s like the damn Planet of the Apes!”

—Fox News commentator Glenn Beck in 2010



In *Planet of the Apes* (1968) the humans are abused in ways meant to echo the treatment of

In his extensive examination of the original *Planet of the Apes* series of films (1968-1973), Eric Greene makes a persuasive case that the filmmakers allegorized the racial conflict and violence of the civil rights movements and Vietnam war protests of the 60s and 70s in an attempt to address the crisis in race relations absorbing the United States at that time. The series drew on the long association between apes and “Negroes” that had permeated European writings about Africans since first contact and later fueled scientific racism’s evolutionary paradigms that located people of African descent “somewhere between the deformed and the simian.”[1] [[open notes in new window](#)] In that vein, the creators of *Planet of the Apes* used species difference as an analog for and a means of working through prevailing cultural anxieties related to racial difference.

African-American slaves.



In reversing racial power relations, the original 1968 film manages to elicit both fear and sympathy from a white audience.



In *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972) the apes are trained to be domestic workers, but are mobilized by Caesar to fight their human oppressors and take over the city.



Greene argues that the ape uprising in *Conquest* (1972) was modelled after the 1968 Watts riots and played to “white fear of racial apocalypse.”

“The sense that racial violence abroad and at home was beyond control had shaken the security of white racial hegemony and led to a self-examination by whites of which the *Apes* films were a part.”[2]

In depicting a society where racial power relations are reversed and humans are treated as an inferior species subject to dehumanization at the hands of their ape overlords, the original 1968 film manages to elicit both fear and sympathy from a white audience.[3]

It's in light of this filmic history that I examine the recent trilogy reboot of *The Planet of the Apes* (2011-2017) directed by Rupert Wyatt (*Rise of the Planet of the Apes*) and Matt Reeves (*Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, *War for the Planet of the Apes*). The new franchise has enjoyed financial and critical success, due in part to the motion-capture technology that affords the actors playing the apes a full range of emotions and actions previously constrained by suits and masks. These apes are believable and sympathetic. The films in the reboot are well-acted and offer entertaining and compelling viewing, with each sequel improving on the last. In its depiction of a subordinate group rising up against an oppressive abusive power structure, its emphasis on family and loyalty, and its representation of archetypal villains and heroes on both the human and ape sides, the reboot offers the viewer opportunities to root for and identify with the apes.

However, because the storylines of the new franchise follow so closely the narrative trajectory of the original series, it is important to examine the ways that it couches these themes within the political and racial framework of the original *Apes* films. Certainly, the high production value, nuanced performances, and computer technology of the reboot set it apart from the stilted, campy, gorilla-suit acting of the first films. Viewed in isolation, without the perspective that the history of the original films provides, the new films can be seen as progressive and to validate the experience of the underdog. Most reviewers have praised the films' exploration of the social and emotional consequences of one group usurping power and exercising it over another; and they have noted the themes of social responsibility, oppression, loyalty, and betrayal, which traverse the films.[4]

Nevertheless, when assessed in light of the franchise's history and situated within the social and political moment of their production, the new films can also be seen to comment on the tumultuous racial climate of the United States during the presidency of Barack Obama. To be sure, no inherent or natural connection is made between the apes depicted in the films and African Americans. And while these apes express human emotions and behaviors, they are not racial stereotypes or caricatures. In other words, there is no Jar Jar Binks here.[5] However, both *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* undercut their overt narratives of resistance and empowerment through the utilization of imagery that evokes episodes of black/white racial conflict taking place in U.S. cities at the time of the films' production and release. *War for the Planet of the Apes* also comments on the racial climate in the early decades of the twenty-first century. However, instead of trafficking in the media spectacle of racial uprising, as I argue *Rise* and *Dawn* do, it offers a critique of the hyper-nationalism peddled by Neo-Nazis and white supremacists in Trump's United States.[6]

As part of a broader system of cultural representations, films both construct and reflect social reality. Hollywood film, in particular, is always a product of the time and social history which informs it, whether the film is challenging or endorsing the prevailing politics of its epoch.[7] Douglas Kellner argues that filmic representations operate as a form of political ideology. Ideology works to “pacify, channel, and neutralize the forces that would invert the social system of inequality were they not controlled.” But ideology also “testifies to the power of those forces, of the very thing it seeks to deny” (14). Films do their ideological work most

keenly during times of “social crisis.”

“Some idealize solutions or alternatives to the distressing actuality, some project the worst fears and anxieties induced by the critical situations into metaphors that allow those fears to be absolved or played out, and some evoke a nihilistic vision of a world without hope or remedy” (168).

In its depiction of a post-apocalyptic, dystopian world where the boundaries of the human are challenged by intelligent apes, this science fiction trilogy both stimulates and justifies our fears about the other and ourselves.

Science fiction, as a genre, is well practiced at social commentary, regularly taking a position on racial politics and race relations in its utilization of aliens and androids as symbols of otherness. In his book, *Race in American Science Fiction*, Isiah Lavender argues that prevailing cultural views about race are “embedded” in science fiction.

“Science fiction often talks about race by not talking about race . . . Even though it is a literature that talks a lot about underclasses or oppressed classes, it does so from a privileged if somewhat generic white space.”[8]

By utilizing techniques of estrangement and defamiliarization, wherein our world is altered and made strange yet seems uncannily familiar, science fiction can explore the boundary of self and other and expose the mechanics of prejudice and racism. However, Lavender suggests that science fiction at times reproduces these biases. In order to see how science fiction sometimes “unthinkingly reproduces white privilege,” we should view the science fiction world of the text as an “ethnoscape,” recognizing “a symbolic transfer of meaning between racial/ethnic politics and the shifting world of the sf text” (158).

Taking seriously both Kellner’s and Lavender’s assessment of the ideological work that film can do in times of social crisis and political upheaval, and how it attempts to “placate social tensions and to respond to social forces in such a way that they cease to be dangerous to the social system of inequality” (Kellner 14), I examine why the *Planet of the Apes* franchise is resurrected during the tenure of the first African American president. Films function differently in different contexts and can produce variant political readings, but I would argue that our social moment—where black men are shot in alarming numbers by police, and white supremacists organize on college campuses and march brazenly in the streets—despite or indeed because of the election of Obama, is eerily reminiscent of the racial climate of the late 60s and 70s. Just as the earlier films do, the new franchise, regardless of its overt message of minority group resistance, engages in a form of racial politics that reflects an implicit white fear of an empowered African American minority and the waning of white privilege.

“Primate in Chief”

In May of 2016, the White House issued a press release announcing that Barack Obama’s oldest daughter, Malia Obama, would attend Harvard University in the Fall of 2017, after taking a “gap year.” When Fox News reported the story on its website, readers responded with virulently racist comments, referring to Malia as an “affirmative action parasite” with “black privilege.” One commentator called Malia a “little monkey” and another referred to Michelle Obama as her “man-thing mother, Sasquatch.” One reader suggested that the “little ape should go to college in Africa.” The responses were so inflammatory that Fox was forced to shut down the comment section.[9] Clearly, associating African Americans with



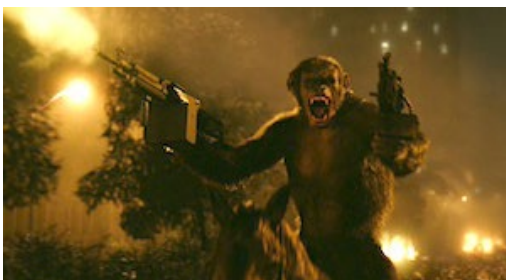
Rise of the Planet of the Apes and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* use imagery that evokes episodes of black/white racial conflict taking place in U.S. cities at the time of the films’ production and release.



Protests in Ferguson, Mo. following the police shooting of Michael Brown in 2014.



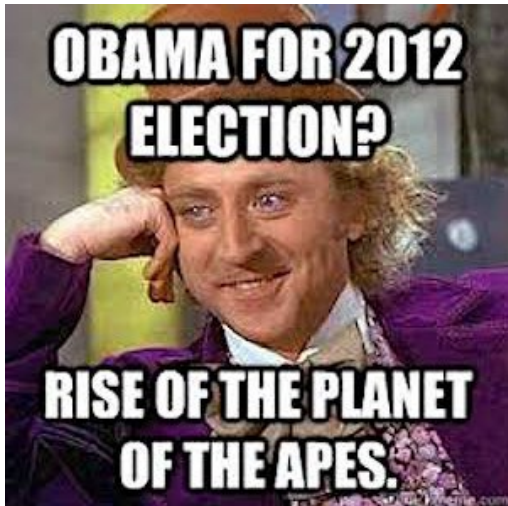
Films do their ideological work most keenly during times of “social crisis.”



Rise works hard to establish Koba's actions as *responses* to what has been done to him. *Dawn* works harder to naturalize Koba's difference, and make a claim for his innate depravity, depicting him as a crazed, vindictive vigilante who must be stopped at all costs.



One of the many photo-shopped images of Obama associating him with violence and criminality.



Greene argues that the phrase 'planet of the apes' is often utilized by whites to express a "sense of white powerlessness in a situation where the 'natural' order has been reversed and the despised racial 'other' now dominates."

apes is an enduring racist strategy, but it resurfaced in public discourse with Obama's entrance onto the political scene. George W. Bush was sometimes lampooned as a chimp during his time in office, but as critics have noted depicting Bush as a chimp is not the same as depicting Obama as one because of the historically trenchant racist association of blacks with apes.[10] Abraham Lincoln, too, suffered the association, not because he was black, but because of his support of African Americans. Dubbed the "black Republican" by Southerners, his condemnation of slavery and support for emancipation also earned him the monikers "Ourang-Outang at the White House," "the Illinois Ape," a "Baboon," and the "original gorilla." [11]

During the 2008 election cycle, t-shirts and buttons depicting monkeys and/or bananas appeared alongside Obama's name or image. The cartoon character Curious George was frequently used as a stand-in for Obama after a caller on conservative Rush Limbaugh's radio show stated that her daughter thought Obama looked like the cartoon monkey.[12] One t-shirt captioned "The Evolution of a President" depicted the well-known drawing of the evolutionary scale of ape to human above Obama's image. A cursory Internet search reveals hundreds of photo-shopped images of Barack and Michelle Obama as chimpanzees, some swinging from trees, with captions like "Primate in Chief." One white supremacist website featuring such pictures of the Obamas is called "chimpout." In 2009, *The New York Post* ran a cartoon which depicted a dead chimpanzee with bullet holes in its chest and two cops standing over it with a smoking gun. The caption read "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill." In 2016, after Trump's election win, the mayor of a small West Virginia town was pressured to resign a day after she had commented favorably on the Facebook post of another official that referred to Michelle Obama as an "ape in heels." [13]

Images of blacks as monkeys proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in postcards featuring the coon caricature, a lazy, bumbling, inarticulate buffoon or dandy who was routinely drawn with exaggerated chin and lips and protruding ears, suggesting a simian resemblance. The purpose behind these representations was to "cater to the White notion that Black coons are too stupid to understand that their efforts to assimilate into White culture only emphasize their inherent inferiority." [14] Comic strips, musical lyrics, children's books and toys all furthered the association, which continued into the late twentieth century with athletes like Jackie Robinson, Michael Jordan, and Patrick Ewing enduring "ape" taunts and thrown banana peels on and off the field/court. In 2017, black athletes still experience this level of racist offense. Brazilian soccer player, Everton Luiz, who plays for a Serbian team was subject to monkey chants and racist epithets by fans of the opposing team. And in May of the same year, Baltimore Orioles' star Adam Jones was racially taunted and had peanuts thrown at him during a game at Fenway Park in Boston.

Notably, Eric Greene makes clear the expression "planet of the apes" carries specific racial power, which goes beyond the historic black/ape association.

"Using the phrase 'planet of the apes' is more than just an ethnic slur likening African Americans to apes. It is a statement expressing a sense of white powerlessness in a situation where the 'natural' order has been reversed and the despised racial 'other' now dominates." [15]

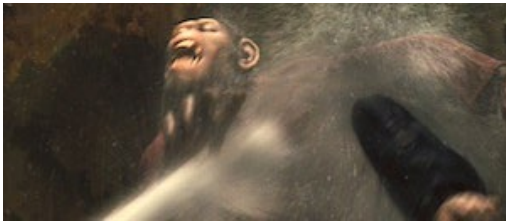
Likening Obama's United States to the 'planet of the apes' became a common trope among the alt-right and certain conservative media circles during the Obama presidency. In December 2008, just after Obama's election win, the white supremacist site stormfront.org published "Planet of the Apes: An Obama Years Survival Guide." Another neo-Nazi site, The Daily Stormer, routinely called Obama's Presidency the "Planet of the Apes Occupation." In 2010, then Fox News

host Glenn Beck, discussing on-air a critique of an Obama policy, asked his viewers,

“What planet have I landed on? Did I slip through a wormhole in the middle of the night and this looks like America? It’s like the damn Planet of the Apes!”[16]

Given this history and the implicit meanings behind the films in the original series, we should inquire why a reboot of the *Planet of the Apes* series with all its attendant racial baggage resurfaces during Barack Obama’s presidency.

Apes then and now



Just as Charlton Heston’s Taylor was abused by his ape guards, Andy Serkis’s Caesar is harassed and hosed by his human jailors.



The original franchise demonstrates that white anxiety about black advancement stems from the fear that the evils visited on the slave will be returned on the master.

In the original film, *Planet of the Apes* (1968), George Taylor (Charlton Heston) and his crew crash land on the ape “planet,” which we later learn is future Earth, and encounter a group of mute, “primitive” humans. The new arrivals are soon rounded up by gorillas on horseback and taken into captivity. Taylor is the only one of the original crew that makes it. Dodge (Jeff Burton), an African American astronaut, is shot and killed (and later stuffed and displayed in a museum), and Landon (Robert Gunner), a white astronaut, is lobotomized. Taylor is shot in the throat, temporarily impairing his speech and preventing him from distinguishing himself from the mute humans that are imprisoned and studied by the apes. Taylor, named “Bright Eyes” by Zira, the chimpanzee scientist, is subject to a variety of dehumanizing treatments in captivity; he is stripped, beaten, tied up, gagged, and, in an obvious echo of the tensions of the film’s political moment, hosed.

Rise of the Planet of the Apes (2011) offers a narrative prequel of sorts to the original *Planet of the Apes*, providing an explanation for the ascendancy of the apes depicted in the first films, suggesting that humans effect their own demise by using bioengineering and “run away science” to tamper with the natural order of things.[17] But the second half of the film, where Caesar emancipates his fellow apes, follows quite closely the narrative of the fourth film in the original franchise, *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972). In the third movie, *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (1971), the two chimpanzee protagonists from the original movie, Zira and Cornelius, are transported back in time to 1973 Earth. Originally welcomed by the humans, they are killed when it is learned that Zira is pregnant, for they fear that the “progeny of the apes will one day dominate the human race and destroy the world.” Their child, who will be known as Caesar, having been switched with a circus chimpanzee, escapes his death. Eighteen years later, *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* finds adult Caesar and his human protector, Armando (Ricardo Montalban), in a world where apes have become pets to humans after a virus killed off all the cats and dogs. Later, recognizing the apes’ ability to follow directions, the humans train them as a domestic labor force. Horrified by the servile state to which the apes have descended, Caesar secretly mobilizes the apes, who rise up in rebellion against their human captors.

The three films in the new franchise, *Rise*, *Dawn*, and *War*, follow the life of Caesar (played by the extraordinary Andy Serkis), who is born to a mother, known as “Bright Eyes,” caught in the wild by African traffickers and sent to the labs of Gen-Sys, a pharmaceutical corporation, as a test subject for an experimental Alzheimer’s drug ALZ-112. Bright Eyes breaks out and attacks her handlers in order to protect her new baby. As a result of her rampage, the other test apes are euthanized. Caesar is rescued by Will (James Franco), the study’s lead researcher,



Protestors take over the city during the Watts riot of 1968.



Seeking sanctuary in the Redwoods, the apes head to the Golden Gate Bridge where they fight with police.



Protestors overtake a police car in Baltimore, 2015 after the death of Freddie Gray, who suffered a spinal cord injury and later died while being transported, without a restraint, in a police paddy wagon in April, 2015.



and brought to the home Will shares with his father Charles (John Lithgow), who is suffering from Alzheimer's. Affected by the drug in utero, Caesar experiences rapid intellectual development and after being exposed to a new version of the drug—ALZ-113, he develops a capacity for speech. After attacking a neighbor while defending Charles, Caesar is locked away in a primate shelter. There Caesar empowers his fellow ape captives with the ALZ-113 and leads them in revolt against their cruel human jailors. After a tense face off with police on the Golden Gate Bridge, Caesar leads the apes to a life of peaceful self-determination in the woods. Meanwhile, the drug proves deadly to humans and results in a pandemic, known as the "simian flu" (*Rise*).

Ten years later, a small band of surviving humans, seeking access to the hydro-electric dam under the ape compound, encounters the intelligent apes. Nefarious actions on both sides result in an armed confrontation between the apes and the humans, causing Caesar and his surviving apes to flee again (*Dawn*). The final film in the trilogy opens 15 years later with the apes holed up in a fortified command base awaiting inevitable war with the humans. Led by a calculating, crazed Colonel (Woody Harrelson), the humans find the apes and murder Caesar's wife and son, causing Caesar to abandon his group and pursue the Colonel to avenge them. When Caesar goes to kill the Colonel, he finds the soldier already infected by the virus mutation now affecting the surviving humans, rendering them mute. Rather than kill him, Caesar watches as the Colonel takes his own life. Caesar again leads his apes, who have been imprisoned in the Colonel's compound, to a new home where he dies as a result of a wound sustained in the recent battle at the compound (*War*).

With the release of *Rise* in 2011, the references to the Obamas and Planet of the Apes become more common. Images of the Obamas' faces superimposed over those of Zira and Cornelius from the original series proliferated, including one of them standing in the sand next to the iconic image from *Planet* of the battered, half-buried Statue of Liberty. In 2012, in the run up to the election where Obama won a second term, one particularly memorable photoshopped image from *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* featured Hilary Clinton seated between the Obamas, depicted as Zira and Cornelius, with the caption "It's a madhouse. A madhouse." Many of these pictures originate from neo-Nazi platforms, like Stormfront.org which styles itself as "the voice of the new, embattled White minority" and is counted by Southern Poverty Law Center as an active hate group. Michelle Obama, particularly, is a favorite target of Internet trolls who compare her face to those of chimpanzees and gorillas, but she is most commonly compared to Zira. This likening backfired for Univision network host Rodner Figueroa, who was forced to resign in 2015 after saying that Michelle Obama "looks like she's from the cast of Planet of the Apes." [18]

In documenting the legacy of the original series, including its adaptation for the small screen and in comic books, Greene remarks on the political value for the extreme right of an appropriated *Planet of the Apes* discourse. One reporter interviewed by Greene asserted that the phrase "planet of the apes" had surfaced as a racial insult at every KKK rally he had ever covered. Tellingly, Greene makes clear the ways in which the politics of the day inform and reinforce prevailing views about race. The "*Apes*" movement from politically influenced fiction to fiction used to influence politics exemplifies the continual exchange in which politics flows into popular culture, which then flows back into politics" (179). This

Caesar successfully mobilizes the apes in their attack on the police.

same exchange between the cultural and the political is evident in the new franchise.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Popular cinema as a form of racial rearticulation



The scenes of destruction and mayhem depicted in *Rise* (2011) echo the unrest in LA in 1992, after the acquittal of four white police officers in the severe beating of black motorist Rodney King.

After the civil rights reforms of the 60s and legislation of the 70s, overt political efforts to maintain white supremacy and enforce racist discrimination were harder to sustain. A new strategy that “would recast themes of racial equality and justice in ways that would serve to rationalize and reinforce persistent patterns of racial inequality” was required.[19] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) These kinds of strategies need to be advanced not solely in a political forum, but in the media and popular culture. Whatever the cultural intentions behind the first two films in the original *Planet of the Apes* franchise (1968-1973), the later films, *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* and *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, in their expression of virulent race paranoia can be seen to be part of such a reactionary strategy as they clearly work to raise questions in the minds of white U.S. viewers about their post-civil rights future. Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that the ideology and politics of the new right and neo-conservatism stem directly from “the new social movements of the 1960s, and both were centrally concerned with defining the limits of racial democracy” (190). If the films of the earlier franchise function as a reactionary racial project, then the films of the new franchise operate as a form of racial rearticulation, which redirect the animus inherent in the history of black/white relations through species antagonism and “scary” science all the while signaling to segments of a white audience the potential racial threat before them. Historically,

“rearticulation proved far more effective than repression in containing the radical thrust of the black movement, and of its allied movements as well” (255).

The current reboot of the original franchise, centered on bioengineering and species antagonism, attempts to mask, in our so-called post-racial, colorblind society, that racial hierarchies are maintained over time by rearticulating the racist ideologies of previous decades. As Kellner has argued,

“Hollywood cinema can be read as a contest of representations and a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and transcodes the political discourses of the era.”

Thus prevailing sociopolitical movements or struggles get “translated, or encoded” in fictional form as means of both reproducing and contesting dominant ideologies (Kellner 2, 39). Because the phrase “planet of the apes” has entered reactionary racist discourse as a shorthand for racial apocalypse” (Greene 177), and because it has been used widely in the media to describe the United States under the presidency of Barack Obama, we do well to question the ideology behind the reboot and the political and social implications of its timing and of its success.

In interviews about *Rise* and *Dawn*, screenwriters Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver, make clear that they had every intention of following the plot of the original films, where the apes come to rule the Earth. They asked themselves

“What’s going on in our world today, that if the right dominoes were to line up, touch each other, it could lead to apes taking over the planet

and, perhaps, getting Colonel Taylor on that beach in thirty-nine hundred years?”[21]

It seems apparent that in *Rise*, the first installment, they determined the right dominoes were to be found in science, specifically in bioengineering and the threat of talking, intelligent apes. And the film certainly draws out in dramatic cinematic fashion the potential implications for our species of an “other” empowered by genetic manipulation. Had the writers and directors remained within the narrative of threatening science, we might not find quite as trenchant a racial subtext, but *Rise*’s dramatic climax is one of violent confrontation between unarmed, though nevertheless menacing, apes and police, a plot which *Dawn* draws out and enhances in its narrative of guns and violence and a thinly veiled metaphor about “power.” The tipping point now, as in 1965, seems to be violent confrontation between whites and blacks, leading us right back to the racial tensions that inspired the original franchise. In 1972 the ape liberation scene in *Conquest* borrowed heavily from the urban uprisings of Watts[22] and later riots in Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and elsewhere (Greene 80). In 2011 *Rise*’s climactic confrontation on the Golden Gate Bridge between the apes and the police along with the scenes of destruction and mayhem in the city that precede it calls to mind the unrest in LA in 1992, after the acquittal of four white police officers in the severe beating of black motorist Rodney King.

Goin’ wild in the penile

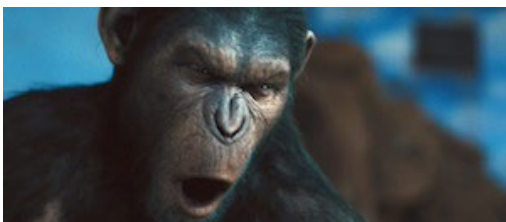
When Charlton Heston’s George Taylor is taken into captivity by the apes in *Planet of the Apes*, he is beaten and abused. Perceived as lesser because human, Taylor is robbed of his white hegemonic patriarchal power. Exposing the mechanics of institutionalized racism, the early film essentializes the humans in ways that mirror racist ideologies historically used to subjugate African Americans. The apes consider the humans to be dumb beasts with communicable diseases, to all look alike, and to be “natural born thieves.” In doing so, the film taps into “a long-standing fear among whites in the United States of an ‘exchange of situation,’ a loss of racial dominance” (Greene 25).

In *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, Caesar’s aggressive, albeit protective, response to the neighbor who attacked Charles results in him being sent to a “primate shelter.” This Caesar’s journey clearly follows that of Caesar in the original franchise in that both apes, endowed with intelligence and speech, infiltrate the subordinated ape population, emancipate them and lead them in revolution against their human oppressors. Interestingly, *Rise* also draws parallels between Taylor and Caesar. And like Taylor, Caesar is considered a dumb beast by his cruel human jailors and is harassed and hosed by one particularly vindictive “prison” guard. Like Taylor who was rendered temporarily mute, Caesar does not speak at first. Both captives utter their first words under extreme duress and in doing so mark the beginning of their separation from their “kind.” What’s different is how the two series frame these two parallel themes and the different resonance of each when race and racial context is taken into account.

In *Planet*, when Taylor attempts to escape his captors, he is ruthlessly pursued, pelted, whipped, roped and dragged by a horse, and ultimately hung up by the apes. When they go to cut him down, he speaks to the apes for the first time,



Charlton Heston’s Taylor is subject to dehumanizing treatments that mimic oppressive practices historically used to subjugate African Americans.



Caesar speaks for the first time, in response to

Landon's taunt: "No!" *Rise* (2011).



Caesar raises his fist in an echo of the Black Power symbol.



Protestor in Baltimore, Md. in the aftermath of the death of Freddie Gray.



Caesar is apprehended and taken to "ape prison" in a paddy wagon. *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011).



delivering the famous comeback, "Get your stinking paws off me, you damn dirty ape!" Arguably, one of the most famous movie lines of all time, the rebuke strikes a chord with a white audience because it seems to affirm what has been obscured all along: the blatant (stinking, dirty) bestiality of the apes and their incredible overreach in attempting to usurp human power. Although Taylor remains captive, undergoes a rigged trial and eventually escapes again, he has the moral high-ground. While the film sets out to analogize the human's experience under ape rule with African American experiences under white rule, it only reinforces the superiority of whiteness, thus providing tacit justification of racial oppression.

This position is echoed in *Rise*, where it's the evil Dodge Landon (in a curious amalgamation of the names of Taylor's fellow astronauts) who utters the iconic "dirty ape" line to Caesar, and the captive angrily rages out his first word, "No!"[23] While I think it's probably the case that most viewers sympathize with Caesar at this moment, the riot that ensues when the apes are freed implies a lurking danger as the riot culminates in Caesar's electrocution of Landon, and the apes' violent confrontation with the police on the San Francisco bridge. It is Dodge Landon (Tom Felton), also, who utters Taylor's other famous line, "It's a madhouse!" when the apes first reject the newly incarcerated Caesar. By giving the hero Taylor's lines to the evil antagonist, *Rise* betrays the ambivalent racial message of *Planet*, evoking white sympathy along with white fear.

The racial reversal works for the most part in *Planet* because there is something obviously incongruous about humans being jailed by apes. Heston's Taylor always seem out of place and ready to right the wrong that deprives him of his liberty. This incongruity is supposed to force the viewer to see the treatment of African Americans as equally arbitrary and dehumanizing, because it "input[es] to white humans, through the use of one of Hollywood's favorite symbols of *specifically* white humanity [Heston], the very animalistic qualities usually ascribed to non-whites" (Greene 45-6). The same cannot be said of the jailed apes in *Rise*. Indeed, there is something all too familiar about these prisoners.

When Caesar is apprehended after committing his "crime," he is transported to the shelter in a paddy wagon and dragged by the neck into the facility. Caesar's difference from the other apes is obvious. He is dressed in jeans and a sweater, making him appear more man than beast, and he is able to communicate with Will by signing. Will and his girlfriend Caroline (Freida Pinto) are reluctant to leave him, but John Landon (Brian Cox), the manager of the shelter, assures Will that they'll "integrate him." Dazzled at first by the mural of the fake outdoors on the wall and the extensive tree-like jungle gym, Caesar, having heeded Will's command to "trust me," asks permission to explore his new surroundings. Too late, Caesar realizes the illusion and so begins his institutionalization. Slowly and painfully, Caesar is forced to recognize his true place in the world. And like a slave who must feign ignorance so as not to provoke his master, Maurice reminds him to be "Careful. Human no like smart ape." Harassed and taunted by inmates and jailors alike, Caesar throws off his "white mask" and embraces his "black skin," eventually becoming the alpha of the other apes.

Though technically an animal shelter, the mise-en-scene is carefully crafted to resemble a prison, with rows of cages in which faces are pressed to the bars. The fact that the inmates, except for Maurice the Orangutan, are dark furred and the jailors are white and employ classic prison control techniques all work to cement the association of apes and blacks and to naturalize the incarceration of African American men. Shot with low lighting and in medium close-up, the apes are vicious and menacing to Caesar; in a frenzy, they pound their cages and screech at him. The jailors call the apes "stupid monkeys" and "lazy baboons," epithets that are technically appropriate in this instance, but operate as racial slurs when the themes of the film and its history is taken into account.



The “primate shelter” with cage upon cage of black faces reflects the disproportionate numbers of African-Americans in custody.

Michelle Alexander has argued the mass incarceration of black people in the second half of the twentieth century has operated culturally as a form of racial control. Though committing crimes at the same rate as whites, in the United States, black men are imprisoned at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of white men.[24]

“[M]ass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America: black people, especially black men, are criminals. That is what it means to be black” (197).

When Will finally arrives to release Caesar, recognizing the captivity of his fellow inmates, Caesar refuses to accompany him. Seeing this, the “warden,” Landon, muses: “I guess he likes it better here with his own kind.” The species difference that Landon observes is layered over by the other formal and narrative elements which racialize the prison and Caesar’s experience there, seemingly pointing to the inevitability of the incarceration of Caesar and his “kind.” In this way, *Rise* endorses and indeed participates on a cultural level in the “tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race” (Alexander 13).

From Watts to L.A. to Ferguson to Baltimore ...

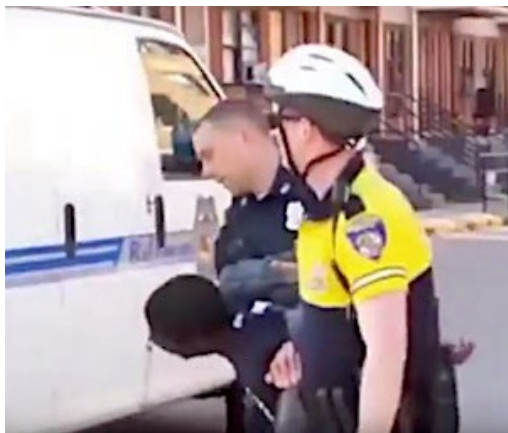
Just as the narrative arc of the original movies reveals, white anxiety about blackness stems from the fear that the evils visited on the slave will be returned on the master. *Rise* exploits this fear, depicting intellectually advanced apes escaping “prison,” destroying property, killing police, and overtaking the city. In 2011, when *Rise* airs, the “Rodney King riots” were the most recent consequential episode of violence stemming from racist police practice and a judiciary which exonerated white cops.[25] But by 2014, when *Dawn* airs, the people in the United States find themselves in a time of racial tension and violence not seen since the 60s.[26] The days and months following the release of *Dawn* in July 2014 marked a flash point in what would become (and continues to be as of this writing in 2017) an epidemic of white police officers killing African Americans and largely being acquitted for their actions.



Caesar is forcibly dragged into the primate facility.

A study in 2015 revealed that young black men die at the hands of police officers at five times the rate that white men do.

“Despite making up only 2% of the population, African American males between the ages of 15 and 34 comprised more than 15% of all deaths logged this year [2015] by an ongoing investigation into the use of deadly force by police.”[27]



Freddie Gray, already visibly hurt, is put into police custody. Baltimore, April 12, 2015.

Just six days after the release of *Dawn* on July 11 2014, on Staten Island, NY, 43-year-old African American Eric Garner was arrested for selling loose cigarettes. A white police officer, Daniel Pantaleo, applied a fatal chokehold to Garner, despite the fact that that form of restraint is prohibited by police departments in the state of New York. Although the medical examiner declared Garner’s death a homicide, a grand jury decided not to indict Pantaleo. Then, on August 9, 2014, just 29 days after *Dawn*’s release, with racial tensions still high, Michael Brown, an 18-year-old unarmed black man, was fatally shot on the street in Ferguson, Missouri by police officer Darren Wilson, who believed Brown to be a robbery suspect. Eye witnesses at the scene report Brown to have raised his arms in surrender when he was shot six times by Wilson, though other witnesses claim Brown was running towards Wilson when shot.[28] Brown’s body was left in the street uncovered for four hours, drawing a number of local residents to hold a vigil and erect makeshift memorials to Brown.

The following day, protests erupted prompting a heavily militarized police presence involving riot gear, tear gas, and rubber bullets being sprayed into crowds of protestors. The Ferguson uprising lasted for two weeks, resulting in the Missouri Governor calling for a State of Emergency, the implementation of curfews, and, ultimately, on August 18, the calling in of the National Guard. An armed police response of this scale had not been seen since Watts, which occurring from August 11-16, 1965, was almost exactly 49 years before.

As a result of an investigation into the nature of policing in Ferguson, the Justice Department issued a report in March of 2015 detailing the unfair and unequal treatment of African Americans by Ferguson police, observing that the department's leadership fueled a culture of "explicit racial bias." [29] To further inflame tensions, on November 22nd 2014, just four months after *Dawn's* release, a 12-year-old African American boy, Tamir Rice, was killed by police for possession of a pellet gun that was assumed to be a pistol. In a December 2015 Gallup poll, 13 percent of people in the United States cited race relations and racism as the most significant problem facing the country, the greatest percentage to do so in a poll since the 1960s. [30]

Media spectacle and trauma



Hundreds of cars and structures were set on fire during the unrest in Baltimore. Violence between protestors and police lasted from April 18-May 3, 2015.

In his examination of the role played by Hollywood in supporting and contesting the actions and policies of the Bush-Cheney administration and its "war on terror," Kellner argues that the media reporting of the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11, which was repeatedly replayed in 24-hour news cycles, had not only a *material* effect, but also produced a psychic effect on the U.S. populace, "traumatizing a nation with fear" (Kellner 100). In their wall-to-wall coverage of traumatic events like 9/11, media outlets turn historical events into "powerful media spectacles" which "shape social memory" (98). A similar dynamic can be seen to be at work in the media coverage of the unrest in Ferguson after the killing of Michael Brown, as well as those occurring in Baltimore, following the death in police custody of Freddie Gray, and the subsequent other scenes of protest and violent clashes between police and protestors/rioters erupting around the country. Analysts from outlets on both the progressive and conservative side have weighed in on the role the media played in perpetuating specific accounts related to Ferguson. While they tend to disagree about the nature of that narrative, most pundits agree that the media's insatiable drive for ratings skewed the story and inflamed racial tensions. Thus, conservative sources suggested that a "false media narrative" perpetuated the "Hands up, Don't shoot!" account (referring to initial reports that Brown was surrendering to Wilson when he was shot), [31] and more progressive analysts suggested that the media was quick to criminalize Michael Brown's past and thus provide justification for his death. [32]

Scenes of burning cars, crazed looters, aggressive militant police, and body after black body shoved against police cars, hands behind backs or atop heads saturated our screens and cemented the polarity of racial views already entrenched in the United States. You only have to scan Twitter or the comment section of any news story to see how the overrepresentation of "black crime," as well as the depiction of "black violence" fuels bias and forestalls legitimate consideration of its causes, and instead perpetuates stereotypes about African Americans. [33] As conservative radio talk show host Laura Ingraham demonstrated on Twitter when reacting to inflammatory images of rioters played on never ending loop on Fox news, "No fathers, no male role models, no discipline, no jobs, no values=no sense of right and wrong. #Family #Character." [34]

Kellner suggests,



A state of Emergency is declared in Baltimore city limits.



A protestor in Baltimore echoes the battle cry of Ferguson, following the death of Michael Brown, 2014.



Ferguson, Mo, 2014. A protestor raises arms in "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!" pose.

"Spectacles of terror use dramatic images and narrative to catch attention, and intended thereby to catalyze unanticipated events that will spread further terror through domestic populations" (Kellner 99-100).

Whereas the media spectacle of 9/11 traumatized and galvanized the populace as a whole, inspiring Americans to support the "war on terror" through overt appeals to patriotism and a ceding of their personal liberty to the government, the media spectacle around Ferguson and Baltimore has had a divisive effect in the United States. Indeed, the nature of the "terror" produced in these media images differs according to the population watching. To a black audience, continual reports of police shooting and killing unarmed black people further reinforces a reality they already know to be true. However, the daily repetition of that story, in whatever city, in conjunction with the endless video of black men shouting, "Don't shoot, don't shoot," right before being shot, and the ongoing fact of police acquittal, can produce anger in addition to a very real fear that the agencies entrusted with guarding their civil liberties will no longer do so. If a citizen cannot seek redress for oppression from the government or the judiciary, our democracy is indeed in tatters. To a black viewer, then, the media spectacle might produce a sense of disenfranchisement, despair, and racial isolation.[35] A white viewer can also be manipulated by these media spectacles, but rather than experiencing fear or isolation, some will find their racist views affirmed and justified.

Because "popular media shape social memory and perceptions of the recent past and present that are still alive in the political discourse and struggles of the day" (Kellner 98), the media spectacle of race riots and lootings conjure up and redeploy narratives of the "scary black man" seething with violence and revenge against whites for enslavement. Regardless of the viewer's perspective, the perpetual reiteration of the racial spectacles of Ferguson and Baltimore produce a psychic effect similar to that experienced after 9/11.

"These made-for-media events become global spectacles that create fearful populations more likely to be manipulated by reactionary forces who give simplistic answers to contemporary anxiety and problems" (Kellner, 100).

In this case, the media's continued sensationalized coverage of the violence in Ferguson and Baltimore works to construct and reinforce the racial polarization of the nation, making us more susceptible to divisive political ideologies.

Hollywood, for its part, capitalizes on media spectacles by reproducing traumatic imagery and shaping audience response to it. Films therefore have the capacity to "construc[t] individuals' views of history and contemporary reality" (Kellner, 98). The writers and producers of *Dawn* likely could not have predicted that their film would be released in an environment of extreme racial violence. But the social, political, and cultural context of a film always informs its reception. And the context surrounding this film was one of extreme racial division, an environment where legitimate calls for checks on police brutality against African Americans resulted in "Blue Lives" being pitted against "Black Lives." Because "cultural products work by accessing our cultural memories" (Greene 89) and because most viewers of the film were likely to see it concurrent with or after the racial uprisings of Ferguson and in the framework of what neo-Nazi groups are labelling a 21st century "race war,"[36] *Dawn* elicits and indeed reinforces the same kind of white racial paranoia as the original films did. In the context of its release, it's hard not to read every scene of social unrest and opposing viewpoints through the lens of contemporary racial strife.



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Fight the power?



Caesar in his aboriginal war paint. *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014).



The apes hunt deer with spears.



Carver's views reflect contemporary discourse on race and racial violence.

From its opening news montage, *Dawn* works to establish the binary of us and them, eliciting our sympathies for the humans unjustifiably killed by the virus produced by infection of ALZ-113. At the same time, in its suggestion of riots and chaos and the end of world order, it also quietly evokes contemporary scenes of destruction and disorder, of clashes between protestors and police which frequent real news segments. A disembodied now dead voice warns,

“Those who aren’t killed by the virus will probably die in the fighting. Maybe this is it; this is how it ends. Pretty soon there won’t be anyone left.”

Tellingly, the conflict waged in the film has nothing to do with the virus—it’s a non-issue for the surviving humans in the film because they are “genetically immune.” What is an issue is territory and “power” (accessing the disabled hydroelectric dam so as to restore electricity is the plot catalyst), leaving us to understand that it’s really the fighting that will kill us. Such a message is certainly consistent with the film’s overt warnings about power and violence corrupting. But as Foster, one of the surviving black characters, notes, the “scary thing” about the apes is that “they don’t need power, lights, heat. Nothing. That’s their advantage. That’s what makes them stronger.” By contrast, if the humans don’t get the power back, they “could slip back to the way things were.” In this world, the humans live in colonies, while the apes come and go as they please. Apes own the “power” but don’t need it. Without the resources of energy, civilization is revealed to be a veneer tentatively affixed to the natural.

After the opening voice over and montage, an extreme close up of piercing eyes and white skin, illuminated by flashes of lightning and punctuated by rolls of thunder, emerges from the dark background. As the camera pulls away we recognize the form as Caesar’s, made white by war paint, readying his now very large posse of apes for the hunt. The mise-en-scene, scored with tribal drums and a haunting bass flute in a syncopated rhythm, establishes a primitive, tribal atmosphere with a rainy, gloomy darkness. The apes don’t live in trees, but in tree houses surrounded by apotropaes made from the bones of their prey. Killing deer with spears, riding on horseback, and walking upright, the apes are less animal than aboriginal. In the ten-year interval since the outbreak that killed most of the human population, they are depicted as having advanced along a pseudo-evolutionary timeline, bringing them one step closer to the “fully” evolved humans they will encounter. Electric power is the commodity that these “natives” possess. In a world stripped of natural resources, it is their post-apocalyptic version of gold, oil, or diamonds. It’s something to kill for though they have no need for it.

Establishing the apes’ inherent otherness is achieved in large part through the character of Koba, whose inability to be quelled by the rational, measured Caesar marks him as the film’s main antagonist as well as the audience’s, a pointed change from our sympathies in *Rise*. Indeed, where Koba’s killing of *Rise*’s vilified Stephen Jacobs is tacitly justified, even sympathetic (more of a letting go, than killing really)[37], [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) in *Dawn*, Koba is a vicious vindictive gun-toting killer who must be stopped at all costs. Though *Rise* works hard to establish Koba’s reactions as *responses to* what has been done to him,



Koba comes upon the banished Carver and kills him.



Dawn depicts a dramatic shift from a community of peaceful, cooperative apes capable of congregation and diplomacy to a violent angry mob with no moral restraint.



Dawn of the Planet of the Apes reproduces images of violence and destruction associated with the racial conflicts of its own historical moment.

Dawn works harder to naturalize Koba's difference, and make a claim for his innate depravity. Koba recognizes early on that, "If [humans] get the power, they'll be more dangerous," and he encourages Caesar to "destroy them while they're weak." Here he goes beyond revenge on a quest for ultimate power, lying to and manipulating those close to Caesar, breaking the cardinal ape rule by killing Ash and attempting to kill Caesar, and ultimately usurping Caesar's role as leader.

Koba finds his narrative counterpart in Dreyfus (Gary Oldman), who will stop at nothing to protect his armory and restore human dominance. Dreyfus is a mighty opponent, but his desire for "power" is depicted as logical and appropriate. Representative of mainstream United States, Dreyfus is a family man, grieving his own losses. He assumes the mantle of looking out for his people, who, with the restoration of power, are peacefully celebrating when Koba's apes attack. The renegade dam technician, Carver (Kirk Acevedo), by contrast, represents an alternative (right) white voice. When Ellie (Kerri Russell) tells him that scientists, not apes, are responsible for the outbreak, he calls her view "hippie-dippie bullshit." Believing an attack by the apes to be imminent because "they killed off half the planet already," Carver's perspective is an uneasy reminder of contemporary discourse on race and racial violence. He is an ape "racist." He hates the apes and doesn't understand why the others "don't get sick to [their] stomach at the sight of them." And as if to firmly situate Carver within a certain demographic, *Dawn* links Carver's bigoted views to a Second Amendment subtext as he presses the importance of defending themselves against the apes. Carver is the first to fire a weapon and the first to kill. When told by Malcolm that relinquishing their guns is Caesar's one condition for allowing them access to the dam, Carver secrets his in his bag, resulting in the humans almost being expelled again. Carver is considered an unlikeable "asshole" by his peers and by much of the viewing audience, but when killed, unarmed, by Koba, who is depicted as the epitome of "black" revenge and concomitant white fear, the film offers justification for Carver's actions.

Koba's first act of treachery is to set fire to the apes' home, shoot Caesar, and frame the humans for it. Before Caesar is shot, the woods are dark and quiet with low lighting around the ape house. As Caesar, Maurice, Malcolm, Ellie, and Alexander look down benevolently from high in the trees onto the now illuminated lights of the city, a peaceful quiet settles over the community, suggesting a hopeful outcome for harmony between apes and humans. But the calm is quickly disrupted by the piercing gun shot and the shrieking ape panic that ensues. The unlawful transfer of power from Caesar to Koba is depicted as the lighting changes from still darkness to burning conflagration. Standing, elevated above the others, and brandishing his gun overhead as the fire he has lit rises, Koba utters a call to arms. "Humans kill Caesar! Burn ape home! Go! Get them! Apes must attack human city. Fight back!" he yells, surrounded by fire. As the flames rise, Malcolm and his family run fleeing the angry, now violent apes. Having scouted out the humans' stockpile of weapons, Koba then leads an ape attack on horseback into the city.

Dawn depicts a dramatic shift from a community of peaceful, cooperative apes capable of congregation and diplomacy to a violent angry mob with no moral restraint. The nighttime cityscape with its dark skies, bursts of machine gun fire, and hordes of marauding black figures looting the armory, and attacking the barricaded humans, recalls the media spectacle of clashes between black



Protestors in Ferguson "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!"



Dawn's nighttime cityscape with its dark skies, bursts of machine gun fire, and hordes of marauding black figures looting the armory, and attacking the barricaded humans, recalls the media spectacle of clashes between black protestors and militarized police.



The media's continued sensationalized coverage of the violence in Ferguson and Baltimore works to construct and reinforce the racial polarization of the nation, making us more susceptible to divisive political ideologies.

protestors and a militarized police. The apes it seems have reverted to "type," embracing their wild savage nature, which apparently no amount of enhanced intelligence can conceal. In depicting racial strife through an ape allegory, the filmmakers undertake a political sleight of hand. With the absence of the noble rational Caesar, we are coerced into rooting for the humans and not the apes. As Dreyfus makes clear,

"They may have got their hands on some of our guns but that does not make them men. They are animals. We will push them back. Drive them down!"

Koba, by this point, is a crazed vigilante satiating his own desire for power and primacy. Because of the prior saturation of media coverage of racial unrest, the audience of *Dawn* is primed to project Koba's rapacious revenge onto today's racial conflict.

Greene makes clear that when the original *Planet of the Apes* franchise was produced and released, "the racial power dynamics of the United States were under sustained, often furious, attack" (12). Although *Dawn* is released days before the racial unrest in Ferguson, it was written and produced in a similar climate of racial division, division in part fueled by the partisanship that developed during Obama's Presidency. While polls taken on the eve of Obama's inauguration reflect optimism among blacks and whites about the state of race relations in the country, polls taken later in his first term show that 37 percent of registered voters believed race relations had deteriorated under Obama. That number jumped to 43 percent in 2013. While race relations did indeed deteriorate as a result of the violence of Ferguson and elsewhere, this pessimism about race can be attributed to the unique treatment Obama received as President. Where other Presidents have certainly been pilloried in the press, they have not been diminished and personally disrespected. In a surreal echo of southern high-school traditions of crowning both a white homecoming king/queen and a black one,[39] Obama wasn't allowed to be the "President" because he was viewed by many in the electorate and the media first and foremost as the "Black President." Every policy decision he made was refracted through a racial lens.

Shortly after Obama's inauguration in 2008, the Tea Party, an ultra-conservative branch of the Republican party, formed. In 2010 members of the Tea Party won a number of congressional seats in the midterm elections, providing a vocal platform of opposition to Obama and his policies. A study published in 2013 measuring the relationship between racial prejudice, white identity, and the Tea Party found that

"Identification with the Tea Party was positively associated with anti-Black prejudice, libertarian ideology, social conservatism . . . and national decline." [40]

To add to this, conservative news channels, like Fox and Alt-right sites like Breitbart and the National Review, offered daily onslaughts of racially charged criticism of Obama and his administration. On numerous occasions Bill O'Reilly used the bully pulpit of his Fox News cable show to critique Obama for his lack of leadership on U.S. race problems. On the few times Obama did talk about race, such as when he addressed the killing of unarmed Trayvon Martin, he was accused of being a race baiter because he suggested the outcome might have been different if Martin had been white.[41]

Surveys conducted from 2010-2012 measuring racial attitudes of self-identifying conservatives found that people in the United States were more comfortable



"Black Lives Matter" vs. "Kill Cops"—slogans exemplify the violence ensuing from pitting "black lives" against "blue lives."



Ongoing unrest following the death of Michael Brown.



Hollywood capitalizes on media spectacles by reproducing traumatic imagery and shaping audience response to it.

talking explicitly about race than in previous decades, leading researchers to surmise that "when they heard public figures articulating feelings they shared perhaps some racially conservative Americans abandoned the old rules themselves." [42] Former presidential candidate and conservative analyst, Pat Buchanan, gave a number of interviews in 2016 stating that the United States was a better place in the '50s when everyone knew their place:

"Whites over here, blacks over here, Mexicans over here and the women at home raising the kids." [43]

And a poll conducted by the Associated Press before the 2012 elections "found that 79 percent of Republicans agreed with negative statements about racial minorities." [44] The racial divide saw blacks and whites "unfriending" each other on Facebook and in real life as racist attitudes toward and offensive caricatures of Obama and his family circulated. For some African Americans the presence of Obama on the political scene forced them to confront racism they thought "had been litigated and fought" in previous generations. [45] At base, for some, was the underlying feeling "that having a black president didn't make any difference. If anything, it made things worse." [46]

If this turbulent social and political environment contributed to the shootings and riots in Ferguson, Baltimore, Charlotte and elsewhere, it's not inconceivable to imagine that the very same environment provided the fodder for the plot and imagery of "racial" tension portrayed in *Dawn*. Here as in the original franchise, "the concerns and issues of the era may have been subconsciously incorporated into the films" (Greene 2). While the filmmakers hadn't yet *seen* the media spectacle, they were surely able to predict what it might look like, especially with the history of LA and Watts in the rear-view mirror. As Kellner makes clear,

"Serious amounts of money are invested in the production of films and television, so they must resonate with audiences and often anticipate what people are thinking about, fantasizing, or yearning for" (39).

Furthermore, if we consider the racially charged political climate of *Dawn's* production, take into account the racial allegory of the original *Planet of the Apes* franchise, and the fact that it is released at the very moment that police killings and race riots are plastered on the news, it seems likely that viewers might associate the current state of race relations in the United States with the takeover of the apes and the take down of humans. Just like the first series, the films in the latest franchise do not "merely record and play back the society's ongoing discourses of racial difference and racial conflict, they ente[r] into it and are a part of those discourses" (Greene 19).

What is perhaps most striking, or most disingenuous, or most politic, is that in no interview (that I can find) do the writers, directors, or actors *ever* mention race. There seems to be collective amnesia or ignorance among them as to the historic and political legacy of the films they're rebooting. In one interview, when asked specifically about the political message of the films, Matt Reeves sidelines the allegorical or metaphorical implications of the question, offering instead a diegesis of the film's universe and the importance of the "apes' perspective." Curiously, he ends by saying that *Dawn* helps us to see how "these problems" can exist and "how we find ourselves time and time again descending into violence." [47] In the same clip, Gary Oldman and Keri Russell both struggle with the question, and then Oldman suggests the film "reflects what's currently happening in the Middle East" and then uncomfortably adds, "you know, you could make the comparisons," as Russell looks down at her hands. Oldman



One of the millions of media images of Ferguson "on fire," and black hands raised in surrender.

quickly recovers and says "I think it's timeless in that sense." Andy Serkis, for his part, praises Reeves for making a film, "which is completely unbiased." So, while the destructive violence is acknowledged, nobody wants to tie it specifically to the tinderbox of U.S. black white racial relations.

However, awkwardly the stars tried to dismiss any political engagement with the films, some critics were quick to discern the legacy of the original franchise. Roger Ebert, for example, suggests that *Dawn* like *Rise* "borrows situations and images from the 1960s and '70s" films in a "playfully political" way, but "leaves an intriguingly bitter aftertaste." [48] A critic for the film magazine, *Paracinema*, calls out the implied racial commentary in the films:

"The assertions made by *Rise* are not new; they've been present in cinema since *The Birth of A Nation* insisted that Black savagery and inherent primitivism would presage the collapse of white civilization. In that sense, *Rise* is nothing more than an unoriginal but sparkly return to a 'rational' racism." [49]

And the blogosphere agrees, calling *Rise* "the 'post-racial' version of *Planet of the Apes* in the same way America has experienced this idea of post-racialism. The issues of race are ever present but largely ignored or discussed in "colorblind" terms." [50]

The ramification of such representational politics has larger implications for society as a whole. We cannot ignore the fact that perceptions of African Americans as more prone to violence and criminality results in their higher rates of detention and incarceration. In fact, African Americans make up approximately 40 percent of the prison population, though they comprise only 13 percent of the overall population. [51] In their study of the black-ape connection, Goff et al also found that "a black-ape association influences the extent to which people condone and justify violence against Black suspects" and the association was linked "to the death-sentencing decision of jurors" (Goff, Eberhardt 294). Indeed "participants were more likely to believe that the beating the Black suspect received was justified when primed with apes than with big cats" (302). As Alexander has shown in *The New Jim Crow*, the criminal justice system produces and enforces racial hierarchy in the United States.

"In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind" (Alexander 2).

Popular culture participates in and perpetuates discourses of racial hierarchy. In depicting criminal "apes" jailed and in violent clashes with police, in *Rise*, and a militarized opposition in *Dawn*, the films cement an association of blackness with animality and lawlessness, and justify and naturalize the incarceration of African Americans. The implicit perception of African Americans as apes continues the legacy of African Americans as not deserving of basic human rights and validates violent retaliation by a threatened hegemony.

Just like *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972), *Dawn* "establishes the terms of its conflict by playing on the audience's memory of extratextual historical

references. . . of racial oppression” (Greene 89) and just like the earlier films, it ends up contributing to racial divisions rather than racial unity. While *Dawn* tries to show both human and ape sides as weakened by a thirst for power and prone to violence, in the context of its reception such a message is dangerously redirected. Koba’s desire for revenge, while understandable in the context of his story of abuse at human hands, risks being falsely aligned with the motives of protestors in Ferguson. Just as in 1972, the movie reinforces a dawning white awareness that black America is ready to fight for justice and to stay “woke.” Indeed, the main reason the ending of *Conquest* was changed from a violent ape revolt to a conciliatory message of peace was because “[e]ven liberal whites who wished—and wish—to see racial inequality eliminated would not –and do not–want to be punished, or even held accountable, for their profit from it” (Greene 110).



Chanting “Jews will not replace us” Neo-Nazis march on Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017. Violence broke out between the white nationalists and counter-protesters, resulting in the death of one woman and the injury of others.



Trump received large support from white nationalist and neo-Nazi groups during his campaign for President in 2016.

Koba receives his comeuppance at the hands of Caesar who, just as Koba does, breaks the one ape commandment: “Ape not kill ape.” While Caesar’s deed satisfies an audience tired of Koba’s villainy and angered by the betrayal of Caesar, it has the concomitant effect of altering how we view Caesar. His character and his heroism are diminished by the act. As he makes clear at the end of *Dawn*, when Malcolm urges him to leave the city to prevent war, “War has already begun.” But in a departure of *Rise*’s narrative efforts to demonstrate that the apes are retaliating against unethical inhumane treatment at the hands of humans, *Dawn* places the blame squarely at the feet of the apes: “Ape started war and human, human will not forgive.” Obviously, this line sets-up the third installment in the series, *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017). However, given the not so subtle substitution of ape for black and human for white, in staging a “race” war which vilifies the apes and redeems the humans, *Dawn* adds oxygen to the incendiary race relations of its day. This is not to say the film is consciously endorsing racism. Rather, in trafficking in imagery associated with the racial conflicts of its own historical moment, it contributes to pervasive white anxiety about black power, an anxiety already heightened during Obama’s Presidency.

Dawn of the Planet of the Apes, in its depiction of apes bent on revenge against humans, released in a cultural climate pitting blacks against whites, delegitimizes African American claims for social justice and reinforces beliefs held by some whites that blacks are inherently violent and a threat to “good whites” everywhere. Because media spectacles like film shape our social memory and construct our reality, the racially divisive message of the film supports the climate of intense partisanship into which it was released and helps to fuel the claims of white extremists instrumental in Donald Trump’s rise to power.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Build that wall



Neo-Nazis raise their arms in Hitler salute during the white nationalist march in Charlottesville.



Pat Buchanan discussing Trump's appeal to white voters during the Presidential campaign of 2016.



California Border Facility where the apes are detained evokes detention centers like Guantanamo Bay. *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017).

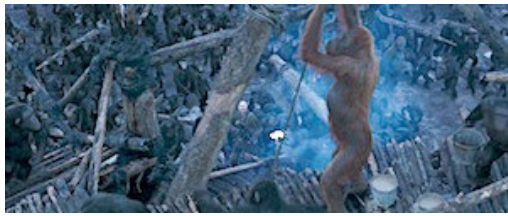
Unlike *Dawn* which gets interpreted retrospectively through the events surrounding its release, *War for the Planet of the Apes*, opening in July 2017, is conceived, written, and produced during the ongoing race crisis in the United States. With hate crimes spiking since the election of Donald Trump and a newly visible, empowered, Neo-Nazi movement gaining strength on college campuses and in the media, *War* doesn't tap into our cultural memory—it provides a blueprint for surviving the cultural present. The open racial hostility leveled at Obama during his two terms in office paved the way for the most racist, xenophobic, bigoted presidential campaign seen in the modern political arena. [52] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Historically, both Republicans and Democrats have made implicit racial appeals to white voters utilizing code words like “welfare reform,” “law and order,” and “immigration reform” to signal to their base their support of policies targeting specific minority groups.[53] But in 2016 Donald Trump showed not only that racial and ethnic groups could be talked about explicitly and derogatorily, but that such invective would be welcomed by large swaths of the voting public.[54]

Many studies correlating voters' degree of racial resentment with support for Republican candidates have found that “Republicans who scored highest on racial resentment were about 30 percentage points more likely to support Trump than their more moderate counterparts.”[55] Whereas black white relations have often been the subtext for Republican race baiting, such as George H.W. Bush's successful deployment of African American convicted murderer Willie Horton in an ad implying Michael Dukakis was “soft on crime,” Trump targeted a variety of racial and ethnic minorities and nationalities. By attacking Mexicans, Muslims, Jews, and Chinese, Trump could tap into a range of current national concerns, including immigration, terrorism, and the economy, in addition to citing bogus statistics about “black on white crime” (15% not the 81% cited by Trump), criminal justice reform, or as he calls it, the “war on cops.”[56] By expressing his racism in terms of a national and/or economic threat to the United States, he deftly segregated the country into whites and non-whites, Christians and non-Christians. From New Hampshire voters who believe that illegal immigrants “are sucking our economy dry” to Neo-Nazis who believe that they have found “the one man who actually represents our interests,”[57] his politically incorrect speech has become the patriot's playbook. In closing borders, banning Muslims, deporting “illegals,” and ending scrutiny of police departments with a record of civil rights abuses,[58] Trump made very clear that the country's economic and national security as well as its very identity required a racial and ethnic purge. As Trump supporter Pat Buchanan made clear in a 2016 interview,

“Anybody that believes that a country can be maintained that has no ethnic core to it or no linguistic core to it, I believe is naïve in the extreme.”[59]

War, what is it good for?

Where *Rise* and *Dawn* reflect white fear of a racial takeover, which can be tied to the hysteria around Obama's Presidency and the visibility of blackness and perceived diminishing of whiteness, *War* insinuates the pendulum has swung too



Caesar's apes are forced to build a "wall" for the demented Colonel.



Soldiers defending the border "wall."



In a scathing parody of U.S. patriotism, the soldiers assemble in formation and salute a defaced U.S. flag as they chant "we are the beginning and the end."



Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, Cuba.

far back. The warning in *War* is not fear of the other, but rather fear of what has become of us—to the United States. Kellner argues that

"when there is dissatisfaction in a society with a political regime, Hollywood is quick to exploit it with films transcoding the dissatisfaction or anger with the ruling group, whatever its politics" (34).

While the humans are still fighting the apes, here humanness doesn't stand for a generic whiteness, it represents white *Americanness*, as *War* skewers the privilege that white Americans have arrogated to themselves. Whiteness in the film is anything but redemptive. Rather it is represented by a jack-booted thug, Colonel McCullough (Woody Harrelson), lacking the humanity that the apes exhibit in spades, and a weak, scared traitor in the figure of an albino gorilla named Winter (Aleks Paunovic).

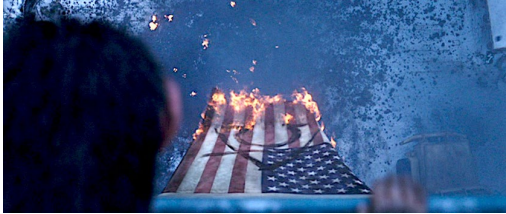
War opens with a military contingent stealing through the pre-dawn California forest where the apes have been hiding out in a fortified tree camp awaiting the arrival of these soldiers, summoned by Dreyfus and his team at the end of *Dawn*. On first glance, the mise-en-scene of the first few frames echoes the racialized divisions of human and ape evident in *Dawn*. The soldiers wear helmets with slogans such as "Monkey Killer," "Bedtime for Bonzo," and "Endangered Species." The soldiers are apprehensive as they look up at the apes on horseback patrolling their forest, unaware they are being hunted. When the African American captain looking through his rifle scope is stopped by a big black gorilla hand on his shoulder, we assume the jig is up. However, as the shot widens to include the gorilla, it's clear they are in collusion. In the intervening period, several apes have turned, and are working as "donkeys" for the humans. These apes, we learn, are what's left of Koba's followers and, fearing Caesar, have joined forces with the humans. Just as *Rise* and *Dawn* repeatedly associate black bodies with ape bodies, here the captain and the gorilla are framed in tight close up with the faces tilted at the same angle looking up to a chimpanzee scout in the trees. Soon enough the floor of the forest becomes littered with black ape bodies, in addition to the captain himself. African American characters die quickly or are demonized both in the original *Planet* series and in *Rise*, but here the quick dispatching of the black captain (Roger Cross) makes way for his Hispanic successor, Preacher (Gabriel Chavarria), whose watchful presence in the film serves as a constant reminder of the complex racial landscape the film will traverse. With his brown skin, *War* positions Preacher as a kind of racial intermediary, expressing allegiance to the Colonel, but showing admiration and empathy for Caesar.

War moves away from a critique of black/white relations and instead utilizes the prevailing Trumpian rhetoric of immigration—of building a wall and securing the border, as well as the discourse of terrorism—of an unnatural enemy and "holy war." Where *Dawn* finds itself in the midst of the divisive racial politics that followed its release, *War* seems determined not to be on the wrong side of history. Mark Bombback and Matt Reeves cast a wide net in this aggressive take-down of a United States whose insularity and divisive nationalism brought us Donald Trump. The heightened militarization of Americanness since 9/11, involving the capture and killings of "high-profile targets," and culminating in the most notorious of all, Osama bin Laden, in 2011 have not made us safer, or less prone to terrorist attacks. Rather, the film suggests, such actions have diminished us. As Justin Chang notes,

"This is hardly the first 'Planet of the Apes' movie to function as an allegory of oppression, hysteria and xenophobia, but it is almost certainly the most trenchant and serious-minded of the lot. It's impossible not to root for these brave and beautiful apes or to feel a



Militarized Ape Detention Center.



U.S. flag scrawled with alpha and omega symbols burns during the final face-off between the apes and the soldiers.



War draws parallels between the Colonel's extreme speciesism and today's Neo-Nazi fanaticism.



Koba appears to Caesar in his delirium, calling him "slave."

sense of alienation from our own comparatively stupid, prideful, and empathy-deficient species.”[60]

In subtle ways, Caesar is represented as a bin Laden-like figure. Rumored to be holed away in a “hidden command base,” Caesar is something of a mythical figure to the soldiers who first encounter him. Preacher, whose face shot in side light suggests his duality, expresses surprise that Caesar is alive:

“You’re him. We’ve been searching for you for so long... Some of us started to think you might be dead.”

In subtly associating Caesar and his protective fortified seclusion with bin Laden, the film doesn’t equate Caesar’s actions or intentions with the mastermind of 9/11, but it suggests an analogy in order to condemn the United States and its jingoistic excess. It offers a warning, to quote Chimamanda Adichie, of the “danger of a single story.”[61] Caesar shows mercy to the humans by letting the captured soldiers go, but he also wants to send a message to Colonel McCullough (Woody Harrelson): “He’ll see we are not savages.” Predictably the Colonel seeks nothing less than the annihilation of the apes, and in a dramatic nighttime incursion reminiscent of the Navy Seal mission to get bin Laden, the soldiers rappel in to the compound on ropes with laser beam flashlights. Mistaking Caesar’s wife for Caesar, the Colonel kills her and radios to his men: “Target acquired. King Kong is Dead.”[62]

Consumed by thoughts of revenge, Caesar abandons his baby son, Cornelius, and the rest of the apes and sets off to find and kill the Colonel. However, aware that Caesar is as much a danger to himself as the Colonel, Maurice (Karin Konoval), Rocket (Terry Notary), and Luca (Michael Adamthwaite) accompany him. When Caesar and his posse, with the help of Bad Ape (Steve Zahn), a similarly enhanced ape raised in a zoo, come upon the prison where the Colonel and his army are based, Caesar finds his apes have been captured and forced into labor. In this former California Border Quarantine Facility, the apes are enslaved and are forced to build a border wall. When Caesar, genuinely confused, asks “Why do they need a wall?” the film critiques the insanity of Donald Trump’s plan to keep out illegal immigrants from Mexico. But this wall is not for keeping out the apes, even though they are the existential threat to humans; rather the purpose of the wall is to keep out the other humans who seek to eliminate the Colonel. But as Caesar observes, “his wall is madness; it won’t save him.”

The virus, we learn, has mutated, robbing humans of the power of speech. Having killed his own son, who developed the mutation, the Colonel has ordered his men to kill anyone who exhibits its symptoms. The Colonel fears that if the remaining humans contract the mutated strain, it will “ro[b] us of those things that make us human. Our speech, our higher thinking. It will turn us into beasts.” But as the film painfully delineates in the Colonel’s crude fanaticism and violent treatment of outsiders and his own people, the humans are already beasts. Where *Rise* and *Dawn* implied that science would destroy us, *War* makes clear that our own hubris and hatred for the other will be our downfall. The Colonel’s “holy war” finishes us all in the end.

There is an obvious and palpable critique of the United States in this film. The ape shelter in *Rise* evokes the U.S. prison complex and makes a connection between imprisoned apes and disproportionately incarcerated African Americans. The military facility where the apes are imprisoned in *War*, by contrast, evokes detention centers like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay where atrocities are



"Apes Together Strong" symbol functions as an analog to the "Black Power" symbol. It helps to mobilize resistance against the apes' human oppressors.

committed in the United States' name. Just like Guantanamo, a U.S. flag bears witness to the atrocities within it, but this flag is defaced and ultimately burns. Like a neo-Nazi flag with a tag, the symbols of alpha and omega are scrawled across the one in the compound. In a scathing parody of U.S. patriotism, the soldiers assemble in formation and salute it as they chant "we are the beginning and the end." When the U.S. national anthem begins to play, on cue they rush to the apes' cells and watch the "donkeys" beat their fellow apes, readying them for work on the wall. Watching all of this from on high is the Colonel who, shaving his head and sipping from his flask, epitomizes an evil "skin head," dispassionately overseeing the apes' torture. The Colonel often dismisses Caesar and his anger and grief by calling him "so emotional." Accusing the captive of being "confused in [his] purpose," and of "taking this all much too personally," the Colonel crafts his own version of "special snowflake"—the Nazi-era epithet appropriated by the alt-right and used broadly by conservatives to attack liberals outraged at Trump and his policies.[63]

While *War* is clearly invested in critiquing U.S. policies on immigration, illegal detention, and terrorism, like its predecessors, it continues to utilize racial imagery associated with African Americans and slavery. The apes are routinely lashed and strung up on trees in punishment. But here unlike the other films, the discourse of racial protest is used to critique the United States. Caesar stands up to the inhumane treatment received by the apes. When Caesar yells "leave him!" to the donkey whipping an orangutan, we get a dark reminder of the country's past and the courage required to challenge it. Punished for his outburst, Caesar is lashed and tied to a tree in a crucifixion pose. In a state of delirium, Koba appears to Caesar. "Slave," he says to Caesar "you cannot save them. Apes all die here." But in the end, they all work together to save themselves. In raising their hands in the "ape together strong" sign, the film evokes the "black power" symbol and offers a cautionary message to whites about repeating the same mistakes.

Heart of whiteness

War, in its exploration of the darker side of human nature, evokes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. And Woody Harrelson's aggressive, troubled Colonel resembles Marlon Brando's Kurtz in Coppola's adaptation, *Apocalypse Now*. The lesson of Conrad's novel is that man's capacity for evil and darkness does not come from an exterior mythical "dark continent" but rather from within us. The sinister threat we project onto others, whether they be Congolese, Vietnamese, or apes, is really a distorted reflection of ourselves. *War* does interesting things with this trope. Rather than pursuing the Colonel into the "heart of darkness," instead Caesar is forced into an empty whiteness. The cinematography provides as vivid a visual contrast between the warm, lush darkness of the forest and the bleak, stark snowy landscape beyond it as does the Manichean narrative itself. While it is the Colonel who epitomizes the rottenness at the core of white nationalism, Caesar is also sullied and darkened by his proximity to it. When Caesar first comes face-to-face with the Colonel at the prison, they are both shot in medium-close up in hard, high-contrast lighting. The deep shadows on their faces emphasize their conflicted, divided natures. It is only in seeing his own vindictive anger reflected back at him in the Colonel's radicalism that Caesar can regain his own humanity.



Nova's oversized hood gives her an ape like appearance.



The war between the humans results in their ultimate annihilation.



Nova's survival and her integration with the apes promises a future of inclusiveness, not division.

Caesar's journey to the heart of darkness involves an encounter with three versions of whiteness—one, the sadistic power-hungry Colonel; two, the frightened traitorous albino Gorilla, Winter; and three, the mute guileless girl, Nova. Before arriving at the camp, Caesar and his group come across a seemingly abandoned homestead where a man tries to shoot them but is swiftly gunned down by Caesar. Upon entering the house, Maurice finds a mute white girl (Amiah Miller) hiding in her bed. Deliberately lowering the gun in Caesar's hand, Maurice approaches the girl and offers her the white doll he spies on the ground. (It is this white doll, and not Caesar's rage, that will be the catalyst for the Colonel's death as it is contaminated with the virus that causes the mutation.) In a tight close up, Maurice's kind eyes and brown face peer gently at the girl and then the camera cuts to the darkness of the bed where the girl lies. As the camera zooms in the girl's pale face emerges from the darkness, as she looks cautiously but not fearfully at Maurice. Caesar wants to abandon the girl who "can't speak," but Maurice tells him, "I cannot leave her." Caesar's initial callousness and watchful wariness of the girl is an indication of how he harbors no vestige of respect or faith in humanity. Indeed, not long after they find her, Caesar breaks the ape commandment again, killing Winter, who having betrayed Caesar is now working as a donkey for the humans. But it is this mute girl, who will become Nova (in a nod to the original series),[64] who represents a different kind of human. As her name indicates, she is "new," and seems to have no allegiance to her own people who have been corrupted by the bitter divisive war. If Caesar is a Moses figure, leading his "people" to the promised land, Nova is Christ like, offering him salvation.[65] Not only does she help to liberate him from his physical enslavement in the jail, her innocence and trust lift Caesar out of his mental and emotional prison.

Though Nova is clearly human in appearance, the big fur hood of the warm oversized coat that frames her face resembles Maurice's facial flange. And she identifies more with the nurturing apes than with the callous humans. When Nova asks Maurice, who is both a parent and teacher to the young girl, if she is an ape, he pauses and tells her she is "Nova"—new. Like Christ, who was prophesied to come from among the Israelites and redeem mankind, this white skinned, blue eyed, blond haired girl who vocalizes like an ape and dresses like an ape, the film implies, is the prophet that will redeem humanity.[66]

The equation of whiteness with desolation and a desperate hatred, in addition to its embodiment by a neo-Nazi type figure comments on today's myth of "embattled whiteness." [67] Building a wall and securing a border cannot protect us from the real threat—ourselves and the parody of humanity the United States has come to represent. Rather than sympathize with the plight of the humans, *War* puts us into Caesar's shoes, and we watch, as he does, with "horror, the horror" at the zero sum game the humans engage in to destroy themselves. But in Nova, *War* offers us the possibility of redemption, a way out of the darkness of whiteness toward a new future of inclusiveness.

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Notes

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1. Phillip Atiba Goff, Jennifer L. Eberhardt, Melissa J. Williams, and Matthew Christian Jackson, “Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94:2, 2008; pp.292-306, 293. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Eric Greene, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics, and Popular Culture*. Wesleyan Press, 1998. 25.
3. In Pierre Boulle’s original novel, *La Planète des Singes* (1963), the ape/human hierarchy does not function as an allegory for race relations; Boulle’s primary concern was to understand what separates human beings from animals and how human superiority could be asserted and maintained in the face of a challenge to it (Greene 33). Rupert Wyatt’s 2011 reboot, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, foregrounds some of these original themes, locating them within particular issues of concern to twenty-first century audiences. Issues relating to the ethics of bioengineering and big pharma, and the extent to which we should utilize animals as test subjects in human drug trials are opened for examination. To that end, the film also explores the question of species boundaries and what constitutes the difference between the human and the animal.
4. David Denby calls *Rise*, “shrewd, coherent, and fully felt,” and a “needling rebuke to human vanity.”
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/09/05/noble-creatures>; Roger Ebert sees *Rise* as a “traditional hero’s journey,” “surprisingly intimate and wrenching.” And *Dawn* as a “messy, often sad sequel” exploring the aftermath of revolution wherein the “tribe’s survival must be purchased at the cost of its soul.”
<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dawn-of-the-planet-of-the-apes-2014>; *The New York Times*’ A.O. Scott suggests that while *Dawn* “paints a darker, scarier picture of the future,” it ultimately champions “tolerance and cooperation.”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/11/movies/review-dawn-of-the-planet-of-the-apes-continues-the-saga.html>. While most mainstream media critics see *Rise* and *Dawn* as transcending the racial politics of the earlier franchise, many bloggers have addressed the racial politics of the film, directly. For the range of these, see

- <http://paracinema.net/2011/12/enlightened-racism-in-rise-of-the-planet-of-the-apes/>;
- <http://kalabashmedia.com/2017/07/20/planet-apes-racist/>;
- <https://feministfrequency.com/2017/07/18/masculinity-rage-and-racism-some-thoughts-on-war-for-the-planet-of-the-apes/>;
- <https://thegrio.com/2011/08/05/the-racial-politics-behind-planet-of-the->

5. Jar Jar Binks, reviled by many *Star Wars* fans, is the controversial character who appears in *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*. He is widely considered to be a racial caricature, resembling the stage persona of the lazy Stepin Fetchit, in addition to exhibiting traits associated with blackface minstrelsy.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20060920011550/http://www.thenation.com/doc/19990705/williams>
6. In my book, *Almost Human, But Not Quite: Hollywood, Race, and the Rise of Donald Trump*, I explore these ideas as they relate to other films and television shows produced during the Obama Presidency. Manuscript in progress.
7. See Kellner and Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Indiana and Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1988; Kellner, *Cinema Wars*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010.
8. Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction*. Bloomington: Indian UP, 2011. 7.
9. <http://bipartisanreport.com/2016/05/02/fox-news-shuts-down-comments-on-malia-obama-post-when-they-realize-how-racist-their-readers-are-video/>
10. See,
<https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2011/04/27/135771740/portraying-obama-as-a-chimp-not-the-same-as-showing-bush-as-one>
11. <https://nypost.com/2011/08/17/sorry-bam-lincoln-had-it-way-worse/>;
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/06/abraham-lincoln-is-an-idiot/309304/>
12. Ralina L. Joseph, “Imagining Obama: Reading Overtly and Inferentially Racist Images of our 44th President, 2007-2008.” *Communication Studies* 62:4, 389-405.
13. “‘Ape in heels’: W.Va. mayor resigns amid controversy over racist comments about Michelle Obama.” https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/11/14/ape-in-heels-w-va-officials-under-fire-after-comments-about-michelle-obama/?utm_term=.08ee06ba4872
14. For a collective sampling of these images see,
<http://www.historyonthenet.com/authentichistory/diversity/african/3-coon/6-monkey/>
15. Eric Greene, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics, and Popular Culture*. Wesleyan Press, 1998. 176.
16. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/07/glenn-beck-compares-obama_n_674591.html
17. I examine the film’s treatment of bioengineering and its exploration of species boundaries in my book, *Almost Human, But Not Quite: Hollywood, Race, and the Rise of Donald Trump*. In progress.
18. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2992012/Univision-sacks-E Emmy-winning-host-says-Michelle-Obama-looks-like-s-cast-Planet-Apes.html>
19. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*. 3rd edition. New York: Routledge, 2014. 190. [[return to page 2](#)]

20. Douglass Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2010, 2.

21. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zaki-hasan/exclusive-interview-rise-_b_925944.html

22. The Watts “riots,” occurring from August 11 to 16, 1965 in the poor, largely African American Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, is considered to be the largest race-related conflict of the Civil Rights period. The fighting followed the arrest by a white police officer of a black motorist, Marquette Frye, for suspicion of drunk driving and resulted in a violent confrontation between onlookers and police, exacerbated by claims of police brutality. Thirty-four people were killed, hundreds arrested, and numerous businesses were looted or destroyed. The National Guard was mobilized to restore peace and order. Notably, the police chief of Los Angeles at that time, William Parker, compared the rioters to “monkeys in the zoo.” <http://time.com/3974595/watts-riot-1965-history/>

23. In *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973), Caesar finds a recording of an interview with his father, Cornelius, from 1972. When asked how apes first acquired the power of speech, Cornelius responds: “They learned how to refuse. On a historic day, an ape spoke a word which had been spoken to him time without number by humans. He said ‘no!’”

24. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010, 2012, 7.

25. The killing of black 19-year-old Timothy Thomas by police on April 7, 2001 led to rioting in the city of Cincinnati and was the largest scale racial uprising since 1992.

26. Between “1965 and 1968 three hundred race-related disturbances and race-related violent confrontations, usually referred to as ‘riots,’ gripped the nation, involving an estimated half million African Americans, a number equivalent to the number of US soldiers serving at the time in Vietnam. The battles resulted in over eight thousand casualties” (Greene 79).

27. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/31/the-counted-police-killings-2015-young-black-men>

28. An investigation of the incident by the Department of Justice, published on March 4, 2015, supported Wilson’s version of events, based on DNA evidence, and found witness statements suggesting Brown was raising his hands to surrender were “inaccurate because they are inconsistent with the physical and forensic evidence” and others were “materially inconsistent” with prior statements by the same witnesses. https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/doj_report_on_shooting_of_michael_brown_1.pdf

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33. <https://www.mediamatters.org/research/2014/08/26/report-new-york-city-television-stations-give-l/200524>;
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36. <http://www.salon.com/2017/04/27/trolling-for-a-race-war-neo-nazis-are-trying-to-bait-leftist-antifa-activists-into-violence-and-radicalize-white-people/>;
<http://www.vocativ.com/338228/white-supremacists-dallas-police-shootings-police/>
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38. Tesler, 208. Fn.15, 16.
39. Until 2004, when the federal Departments of Justice and Education declared the practice "inconsistent with federal law," many schools in the south crowned separate black and white homecoming officers. In addition to racially segregated proms, such practices were attempts by schools to challenge the spirit of integration. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2004/10/13/07ocr.h24.html?tkn=UNYFviETHGPbkrdA14ryrqrE5rism5gAMofM>
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46. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/30/politics/why-black-america-may-be-relieved-to-see-obama-go/index.html>
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[political-message/#](#)

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63. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Special%20Snowflake>

64. In *Planet of the Apes* (1968), Nova is a mute human paired off for procreation with Taylor. He rescues her when he escapes captivity, although both soon learn

that escape is impossible.

65. The comparisons of Caesar and Moses are many, both in the original franchise and in the reboot. In *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, Caesar's parents, like Moses's parents, defied the order that all baby apes be killed by hiding him in a circus, where he was later adopted. In the current film, Caesar liberates the apes from slavery and leads them to the promised land.

66. Of course, we do well to question why such a savior *needs* to be white, and why whiteness is, at least in the case of Nova, tied to purity and innocence.

67. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/28/opinion/white-power-and-the-fear-of-replacement.html>; <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/media/339686-how-the-fractured-media-landscape-is-fueling-the-resurgence-of-white>

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Imagining change: a short history of radical film in the U.S.A.

by Chuck Kleinhans

Preface

I was asked to give the opening keynote address to the Radical Film Network gathering in New York City, May 3, 2017. RFN was organized by two British scholars who received a grant to run several events. They had two conferences in the UK in earlier years and decided to have the third one in NYC with the aim of international expansion. The NYC situation allowed for the conference to take place the three days before the month long Workers Unite! Film festival that takes place at different venues around the city every May.

I didn't attend the earlier events in the UK, but I was eager to attend this one. In retrospect I think it made a healthy advancement of the organization's goals. I also wrote up a set of reflections after the event which I'll post separately. I've elaborated a few points here that came up in the Q&A after my talk.

Alex Juhasz, media teacher/scholar/activist, gave me a very flattering introduction.

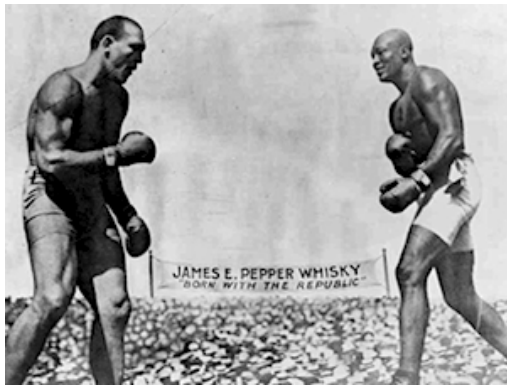


Workers Leaving the Factory (Lumière)
(Note that many of the workers here are women)

Thanks for that introduction, Alex. I want to thank Steve Presence, Mike Wayne, Andrew Tilson, and the other organizers of this wonderful event for inviting me to talk to you today. And, it's great to be back in New York City, a sanctuary city, which on Monday, May Day, the international worker's day, held a number of



A Corner in Wheat (D. W. Griffith, 1909)



Johnson-Jeffries fight (1910)



number of rallies and demonstrations for immigrant workers (as did other U.S. cities).

I was asked to discuss the history of radical film in the U.S. providing a perspective on the situation we find ourselves in today, and hopefully, I'll add, looking to what we might accomplish in the future. Obviously we now live in interesting times and a new energized discussion is taking place among activists in the wake of recent electoral events. I don't want to address that discussion here. I think we will all be referring to it both formally and informally during the conference, and we can learn from each other.

Similarly, I'm working from a broad understanding of the term "radical." My own interest has always been to look at things from the perspective of grass roots activism encompassing issues of class, race and ethnicity, gender, and so forth and with an international and cross-cultural perspective. And oh, I should probably mention that I've been a working photographer, and made films and videos.

I want to address three large topics today. One is to take a longitudinal look, an historical survey, of radical film. Second is to take a latitudinal regard, to move from the usual focus on specific films and makers to include other agents in the much larger process of funding, production, distribution, exhibition, political organizing, curating, archiving, and teaching. Third is to consider the role of new and changing technologies in radical media opportunities in the past, present, and future.

History

From the very start of film, the working class has been present in film, although usually without a voice or without their perspective.

The power of moving image photography, adding to a previous activist practice of using photography for social and political reform, such as depicting the conditions of the poor, was seen as an important tool by reformists, both liberal and radical. And, we might remember, even by conservatives, as in D. W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* which contrasts the opulence of the rich and the misery of the poor caused by to a capitalist speculator in the grain market. By apparently divine justice, he dies buried in wheat.

The potential of filmmaking for effective propaganda for a social and political cause inspired early efforts in the U.S. and the U.K, for issues such as women's suffrage, healthcare reform, poverty, and so forth. Early in the 20th century, we see film used for documentation, and for dramatic narration of important issues. So: to show and to persuade.

And let me remind us of the importance of visual evidence: of showing in a way that earlier was conveyed through the extensive filter of words, of journalism within the framework of the capitalist press. The footage of Jack Johnson, the famous boxer, itself was considered so potent at showing a black man beating a white boxer, that it was often censored by cities and by states, as the man himself was attacked by white opinion (and at the same time provided a powerful image for African Americans).

Thus, it's not always the precise *intention* of moving images that accounts for everything. We also have to understand the history of how films were seen and

The Immigrant (Chaplin, 1917)
Modern Times (Chaplin, 1936)



The Spanish Earth, (Joris Ivens 1937)



Columbia Revolt (NY Newsreel, 1968)



The Brig (Jonas Mekas, 1964)

used by the audience.

In addition to actuality presentations and social reform efforts, we know that throughout the Teens and Twenties entertainment cinema appealed to the working class, and while I won't get into that here, I want to note that comedy, particularly in the figure of Chaplin's Little Tramp, stood for and gave an empathetic validation to the dispossessed, picturing Charlie as clever, resourceful, and an active agent in facing opposing forces.

Two other moments from the 1920s should be mentioned here: the full flowering of a radical film movement in the Soviet 20s, with innovative directors seizing the opportunity to build on earlier developments in film form and narrative for a directly politically informed body of work, though it would become better known in the West in the 1930s. And, without the resources of state sponsorship, independent artists working in the Surrealist and Dada movements created the first examples of an artisan cinema that often addressed political topics.

Both of these movements inspired people in the U.S. in the 1930s to develop the Film and Photo League and begin the production of working class activist films. The Film and Photo League worked with labor organizing lead by the Communist Party, and in that framework also showed Soviet films and was thus an important starting point for directly political filmmaking, supporting not only documentation of actual strikes and protests from a ground-level point of view, but contributing to international efforts such as support for Spain during the Spanish Civil War.

This period marks the start of a sustained social documentary movement in the U.S. (detailed in the standard histories such as Eric Barnouw and Jack Ellis) that is often linked to liberal-progressive films of the era such as Roosevelt administration policy promotions for rural electrification and water resource management. And in passing, I think it's worth noting that we have often looked at many films of this era and in this tradition as "liberal" or "mildly progressive" rather than truly class-consciously radical. (I've said that in teaching and writing.) But looking back from the current neoliberal shredding of the social contract and the destruction of public goods such as clean drinking water, and the capitalist takeover of such essentials as healthcare and education, we might want to reconsider those films as promoting basic rights.

These films and their filmmakers showed that cinema could be a powerful force for influencing public opinion, for showing otherwise hidden events and situations, and adding to the visual imagination of political understanding. And WW2 accelerated media use in the service of national policy and practice. For military training, for industrial education, for propaganda film production--all of which was outside of the Hollywood studio system--there was a vast expansion of filmmaking, particularly in 16mm form. After the war this also produced a huge surplus of film technology: film projectors went to K-12 classrooms, and a new educational film market developed. Film cameras and discount film stock were available for independent filmmaking. And new markets appeared: for television journalism, for advertising, and for industrial use.

That change in the infrastructure provided the basis for a new wave of politically motivated radical film in the 1960s. The fiercely militant film. *Columbia Revolt* (1968) by New York Newsreel could come into being precisely because of earlier work by a wide variety of progressive filmmakers: some of them artists and some of them journalists and some of them people with something to say who realized that it really was now within their grasp to make a film.

For example, the artist: immigrant from Lithuania and antiwar activist : Jonas Mekas, *The Brig* (1964) interpreted last outlaw performance of the Living



Harvest of Shame (CBS Reports series, 1960, Edward R. Murrow, Fred W. Friendly, and David Lowe)



The Cry of Jazz (Edward Bland et al., 1959)



The Battle of Algiers (Pontecorvo, 1965)

Theatre's production of the anti-military play by Kenneth Brown, at the start of the U.S. escalation of the Vietnam War.

And earlier, the journalist: Edward R. Murrow's report on migrant farm labor, *Harvest of Shame*, shown Thanksgiving evening on a major network.

And individuals and local groups: Edward Bland et al. who made an amazing polemic about African American culture in *The Cry of Jazz*.

The 60s also marked an important change in the U.S. radical film scene as international films brought new topics and ideas into public discussion in the US. In particular the works of Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave gave younger audiences new ways of imagining the world, their place in it, and how to understand it. These challenging films became part of a common core of this generation's intellectual development, and often the most compelling way to consider ethics, politics, personhood, and being engaged in the world. New work from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Hungary opened eyes to another view of socialist society. And films such as *The Battle of Algiers* presented a compelling understanding of colonial repression and national liberation.

Most significantly, films produced by, for, and in the Third World became available. Films from Cuba, Latin America, and Africa presented a new political militancy and boosted the growing native U.S. opposition to the Vietnam War and expanded anti-imperialist consciousness. The presence of these new voices encouraged broadening of the audience and issues, as well as speaking in new ways to newly emerging political movements: Black Civil Rights, Chicano farm labor organizing, the student movement, the antiwar movement, and the beginnings of a Second Wave feminism. And younger radicals often began the important task of recovering the lost and repressed history of earlier militant activism that had been suppressed by the Cold War by recovering and exhibiting films such as *Salt of the Earth* (1954) by blacklisted makers

And by making films about the militant past such as *Union Maids* and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*.

This movement changed in the 1970s, in part because of changing politics, in part because of changing conditions, and with the arrival of new faces and new perspectives, the world of radical film continued to evolve. New work continued to be made, but often under different circumstances. That transition was complicated. For example, while initially broad based and shaped by socialist feminists, the Women's Movement was often weakened by domination by white liberal feminists who tied it to the Democratic Party, and who ignored women of color or rejected cultural lesbian feminism. It took time, and "the long way around" to bring this diversity back together. I want to quickly point this out here, the actual history and politics are complicated, and I don't want to get into a contest about it. But it is important to note that movements change. The gay liberation movement for example, went from being a relatively simple civil rights and cultural hub to becoming increasingly political with the AIDS crisis. And the films made in, with, and by emerging forces also changed: the Black Movement after the end of the Black Panthers, and so forth.

Throughout the Reagan and Bush Era (1980-1992) radical filmmaking continued but in a broadening stream. Part of this reflected new social and political movements, part of this resulted from advances made in television and journalism to represent women and minorities, and part of this resulted from newer technologies making production and distribution easier, quicker, and cheaper. The shift to video in broadcast and professional making as well as in alternative and grass roots media allowed for vastly different shooting ratios, quicker turn



Salt of the Earth (Biberman, 1954)



Union Maids (Julia Reichert, Miles Mogulescu, and Jim Klein, 1976). *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Connie Field, 1980)



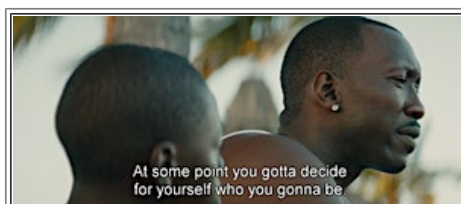
around for news production. We might remember the Vietnam War that appeared to U.S. dinner tables in the 60s was shot on film and shipped to the U.S. for processing and editing. When combined with satellite transmission, video allowed for real time coverage of events. And the new delivery system of videocassettes grew through the 1980s to allow radical “film” to be seen easily in many new spaces: the home, the workplace, the school, the community center, the gathering of friends.

With this understanding, let me underline the title of my talk: imagining change. I think this is a useful way to think about the “radical” in “radical film.” Media that helps us and others imagine that change is needed, that it is possible, and what it might look like. Thus radical film should be understood as a spectrum of possibilities and examples. During the darkest days of Bertolt Brecht’s exile from Nazi Germany, he wrote about what people within Hitler’s realm could do to resist within a totalitarian dictatorship: talk about change. Against the “Thousand Year Reich,” the playwright said simply reminding people of dialectics, of contradiction and inevitable change, broke the power of the dictator.

We can use the same idea to form an encompassing view of radical media today. What works to help people imagine change? Certainly it’s easy to see how short militant works targeted at specific campaigns such as the fight for a higher minimum wage, or against a pending change to environmental policy should be included here. But it’s also the case that within the weekend multiplexes, in the past few years we can find films that point to the necessity for change and the possibility of change: Academy award winner *Moonlight* and box office hit *Get Out* are cases in point.

Indeed, we are living in a remarkable period of media that recognizes black America. Consider: *Hidden Figures*, *Loving*, *Fruitvale Station*, *Tangerine*, *The People Versus O. J. Simpson*; *O.J.: Made in America*; *Selma*, *13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro*.

But as you can see, I’ve already moved beyond my initial longitudinal survey of notable films into my ideas about the larger context of the world surrounding the individual film and about technological change. So let me pivot to that.



Moonlight (Barry Jenkins, 2016)



Get Out (Jordan Peele, 2017)

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The radical film artworld

The dominant tendency in thinking about radical film is to concentrate on the work itself as an aesthetic and communicative object, and usually on the filmmaker, the auteur, and his/her achievement as genius. This is understandable: it is what most often gets attention when a new film is released. It starts the publicity ball rolling. It fits the need that film has to justify itself in relation to what are often more highly regarded fields of serious writing, investigative journalism, and traditional arts. Filmmakers are artist-creators too!

But this tendency also obscures the absolutely essential parts of the process from funding to exhibition. Consider funding. Gathering the resources to begin to make creative work takes time, talent, and money, money, money. Where does this money come from? How can we find it? (BTW, I don't have the answer, but let me know if you'd like to finance a project I have in mind.) And beyond the first step of finance, how do we actually assemble the creative and craft talents to begin production? That involves training, experience, and learning to work together. It means organizing a complex process that must be continually reassessed and guided on the fly. And then, when we get to a finished product, how do we get the work distributed and exhibited? All of these stages of film making are essential and often difficult, sometimes stopping projects before they are finished. And it's even more complicated with radical political film. The inevitable ebb and flow of real world politics changes the media world. Projects begun under one set of circumstances can be sidelined as conditions change, different forces emerge, as events overtake initial projections.

I want to emphasize this because to focus too much on the individual film and filmmaker can lead to failing to plan for and account for the difficulties of the process. How many of us older folks can remember projects that went on for years without reaching completion, or which were functionally dead on arrival due to changing political situations? And how many younger folks saw a Kickstarter that got out of the starting gate but failed to complete the race? Or works which failed to speak effectively to an intended audience? I say this not to scold, but to ask us, all of us, to wisely manage our projects. Dreams and good intentions are not enough. Hard shell realism needs to balance the hopes. So, we need to think of the whole process, to take the wide view of radical film projects.

To get films seen, noticed, and talked about requires distribution and exhibition. And in most cases in the U.S. those functions must be conducted as a business, even if a nonprofit business. That makes it a volatile sector, but over the years a fairly stable network of festivals, has developed such as the Worker's Unite Festival beginning Friday Night here in NYC. For decades now, a wide range of other festivals covering feminist film, black and African film, LGBTQ film, Latino and Latin American film, social justice issues, have expanded both as independent projects and sometimes tied to multifaceted organizations.

And progressive distributors have managed to find and maintain a place. Some such as Icarus, aimed at the education market, and Sut Jhally's Media Education Foundation, which makes media criticism videos targeted to classrooms. Others such as New Day, Women Make Movies, Frameline (LGBTQ issues) and Third World Newsreel and California Newsreel also have had long legs, continuing for

decades. And a salute to Chicago's Kartemquin Films which just celebrated 50 years of producing films on political and social issues.

Another dimension of distribution should be considered: the deliberate screening and discussion model of a targeted political campaign. Perhaps the best model for this in the U.S. was Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (David Guggenheim, 2006). While essentially a flashy illustrated lecture on man-made global warming, the finished film was shown theatrically, but more importantly in local and community based venues. In Chicago where I lived at the time, there were dozens upon dozens of screenings in churches sponsored by social justice committees, in community centers and schools, and so forth. By widespread DVD distribution, a small group screening with a discussion afterwards educated and enlisted viewers in a way to connect immediately to appropriate neighborhood action: "Think Globally, Act Locally" in practice. From finance to end point activism, the project was conceived and executed thoughtfully and effectively.

And following the U.S. propensity for DIY (Do It Yourself) independent institutions, we also have a variety of projects ranging from the more recently expanded and evolved Flaherty Film Seminars to important local spaces and programs such as UnionDocs here in the city, as well as venues such as Anthology Film Archives, film exhibition by MoMA, the Whitney, and other museums. Similar exhibition spaces exist across the US, many run as a labor of love or in the precarious world of indie funding. Related to this in the past two decades we've seen the development of two new models often called "nomads and settlers." This refers to the practice of independent artist/makers regularly touring with their new work, finding venues and helpers/supporters across a wide geographic spectrum, and also the practice of local micro-cinemas, pocket sized exhibition spaces in a home, loft, or studio, storefront, or gallery that bring together and bond intimate viewing and discussion, often with the makers present.

And it is also important to recognize the work of writers who and publications which attend to radical films. A film may be shown, but knowledge of it needs to be spread, amplified, by journalists and critics writing about it, explaining and evaluating it, and letting others know about it. Since the 1960s that role has often been taken up by writers for the weekly papers (now in a state of decline) and more recently by online centers such as Indymedia (indymedia.org). Special mention should go to two publications that have sustained attention to radical media for decades: *Cineaste*, now 50 years old, and my own publication, *JUMP CUT*, for which all issues are available free online at www.ejumpcut.org. Reading back issues of both is one of the best ways to understand the rich and varied history of radical media in the US.

Fortunately for all of us, some people do that: media curators, archivists, preservationists, historians, and teachers organize and maintain at their best, the vital knowledge of past achievements and failures. They help move forward without reinventing the wheel. And I'd like to recommend to all of us here, and especially the younger people, that can be refreshing and inspiring to learn from the dynamic past of radical film. I've attached a select bibliography that indicates some starting points for your own exploration.

So, with that attempt to open up our field to not only time and history, but also expand it laterally, beyond just films and filmmakers, to account for the broad network which is necessary for radical film to exist and thrive, I want to pivot back. But first, an aside now that will become important later. We need to remember that the "radical" in radical film is always pertinent to a context and contingent on history. Something not originally intended as political can become so. A classic example: Hollywood made a fast paced thriller in 1979, *The China Syndrome*, in which a nuclear power plant begins a crisis meltdown. The film wasn't made to be



The China Syndrome (1979)

radical (though it clearly marks the villains as big energy corporations that short cut safety regulations for a buck, and it starred Hollywood progressives Jane Fonda, Jack Lemon, and Michael Douglas).

But it became radical in the activist sense when, 12 days after release, there was a nuclear energy plant incident at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania. Suddenly an entertainment film became the focal point for the public imagination of disaster, and anti-nuke activists were able to effectively leaflet at screenings and get their message across.

The point I want to make here is that a specific work can become unexpectedly politicized. But the reverse is also true: an intentionally political project can self-sabotage if it can't change with the time. When a project takes years and years, the fundamental situation on the ground may change and thus the completed work may no longer be topical or even very relevant. For radical media, "windows open, and windows close."

New forms, new technologies, new makers

If we say that neoliberalism became the dominant aggressive form of capitalist exploitation and governance beginning in the Thatcher-Reagan era, we can also say that moment marks a new direction in the world of radical media. The arrival of consumer format video, of digital media, internet and streaming has changed the game. On the one hand, neoliberalism wants to invade the commons and monetize it, to shred the social net and privatize it, to make each individual an individual consumer in order to sell more, extract more value. On the other hand, by giving individuals more tools and more chances, a new basis emerges for grass roots activity.

We see the results of these changes in some dramatic ways. For example, ten years into the introduction of the home video camera, we have the footage of Los Angeles police beating motorist Rodney King captured and replayed again and again on the news.

The resulting trial of the officers resulted in their acquittal and following that the four day long Los Angeles Riots. Subsequently, the O. J. Simpson murder trial took place and was broadcast in its entirety by a new cable channel, Court TV, and the networks followed suit. These events mark a new era in media use to document politically charged moments, and to make previously obscured government processes suddenly open. Of course we now know where that takes us: to cellphone cameras that allow widespread capture of challenging images, of personal communication devices that allow for rapid mobilization of opinion and gathering for action.

It also opens new possibilities for youth and community media. (A good example was presented at the RFN conference with L.A.'s Echo Park Film Center.) The tools of media production are now potentially in the hands of many more people who can bring their own perspectives and issues to the fore. I point at this change as something we need to understand, not because I think that new media is going to remake political reality: the optimistic projections of the "Arab Spring" have now settled down to a sober estimation of practical power and the force of repression on citizens. But the diversity we see as a result of many new voices, and



Rodney King footage (George Holliday, 1991)



Michael Moore, *Roger and Me* (1989)

new makers, is apparent in radical work from the 1990s on. Sometimes this takes the form of dramatic narrative film, the most familiar type of storytelling, but it can also take performative shape as with mediated versions of music, dance, visual art, spoken word, and embodied action.

Formerly the main line of radical film development was the model of the classic social documentary, with a sobriety of investigation, a modeling of clarity through organized persuasion, a point of view even if not an omniscient narrator guiding us along. That changed in the 1990s in the wake of Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) which investigated a serious (and still present) issue: the disastrous decline of the General Motors factory town of Flint, Michigan, with a goofy host whose own personality was much of the center of attention. As a Sundance film, a full length theatrical success, it became a model for many aspiring documentary filmmakers.

The very terms of documentary film began to shift, something that was caught up in successive stages of the series of Visible Evidence documentary film conferences where a vastly expanded understanding of reality based cinema was presented, argued, and debated, and in the newly invigorated programming of the Flaherty Film Seminars which also offered a broader and more diverse selection.

Today Internet distribution and streaming delivery have created new possibilities for delivery of radical content. Particularly with video blogs, new voices have been empowered to add their issues and creativity to important issues. Much of this is in flux and varies with degrees of access and quality of service, but we are definitely in a time where interactive media is an active presence that radicals can use. We have the new practice of i-docs, interactive documentary that can expand the range of voices speaking to an issue, voices which often come from activists who use a website based on the documentary as a resource for collective social action.

Conclusion

I want to reflect on an earlier point I made, the one about the need to understand radical media in terms of a broad production concept and also to think about actual effects and political efficacy and impact. When new work appears, all the attention is on the film itself and understandably the maker. But there's little discussion of projects that are never completed, or which fail to find an audience, or which don't serve an ongoing real world political campaign. But we need to do postmortems. We see that often painful, and sometimes unpleasant task proceeding in the wake of our Presidential election, and in the UK, post-Brexit. It is not easy to analyze and discuss failure, but it is necessary if we are going to move forward, to learn from our mistakes and losses, and find a new and better strategy to succeed next time, to make new work to rise to the challenge, and to actually have a career, to have a long term commitment to radical change that we can live with and live through. That's not easy, but learning from the past can help

us imagine change in the future.

Some notes on radical art/ experimental/avant garde media

This came up in the Q&A and requires a more elaborate discussion. To give a very concise response, I'd highlight several matters.

First, the nature of art itself is to contribute to a radical and humanizing understanding and experience. In that sense, art is an aspiration, and a form of expression for both the individual and the collective.

At the same time, we've seen, sometimes, art turned by commerce and politics into arch-conservative and fascistic modes, consumer advertising, and bulwarks of the dominant systems. And we've also seen a tendency to overgeneralizing and simplifying the "subversive" nature of art by looking at its rule-breaking, convention-defying, and taboo-crossing aspects too simplistically.

Media artists, like others in the art world, often stand at a tangent to the social and political mainstream. Due to a common precarity in work and income, to openness to expressing alternative values in art and lifestyle, and to an entrenched skepticism or disrespect for received wisdom and conventional pieties, artists have an affinity for radical dissent that takes on form and content, aesthetics and politics.

It's sometimes claimed against artist created work that the form is too strange or confusing to speak to a broad audience. And we've all seen examples of artists so wrapped up a narcissistic devotion to individual self-expression that they can't speak except to an existing coterie. But I've also seen many examples of artists using an innovative and even strange form to make a new kind of expression, one that can cross over. In fact, I've observed that if an audience strongly desires to learn about something, they find new form no particular hindrance to understanding the work at hand.

It's worth remembering that by the start of WW2, many artists in Central Europe moved to the U.S., and that New York replaced Paris as the center of world art. This infusion of new talent included media arts, and NYC remained the prime city for artists around the world after the war. In a significant way this shapes the understanding of experimental media art while also providing a rich stew for the continuing interaction of film artists with painters, performers, dancers, musicians, writers, inspiring both a bohemian camaraderie and the productive intersection of political movements and cultural subcultures.

Through the postwar era avant-garde film had a small but growing audience, but a "starving artist" base of creative makers. Unlike the consecrated arts of the museum and gallery artworld, where a painting, say, was a valuable and unique object, being a mass reproducible art, film didn't have an object to sell, or collect. Media artists had to have a trust fund, a supportive spouse or patron, or a teaching job or other administrative position, or salable craft skills, or a day job to make a living.

And experimental cinema's hallmark was the theatrical experience: gathering together with others. This began to change in the Sixties and Seventies. Part of the taboo and subversive qualities began to evaporate with the gradual legalization of commercial pornography. Another development, technological, changed things. The arrival of video by the 1990s created a new spatial variation for viewing. The "white box" of the modern gallery began to contain a "black box" area for

continuous video screenings during an exhibition. By the Millennium, and the arrival of high definition digital video on flat screens easily used in normal light settings, painters and sculptors and other unique object artists, on their own, or encouraged by gallery owners and curators, began to include screen art in their shows. But unlike the earlier sanctity of the experimental film or video screened theatrically to an attentive audience viewing each work as a whole, the current mode of screen art in galleries is mostly just moving wallpaper, a decorative background for people passing through the space, spending a couple of minutes or less on any one screen. This itself changes any potential for a “radical” content or experience.

In the current period, we must not simply consider the aesthetics of media art, but also the economics of the art market under neoliberal capital. The acceleration of economic inequality shapes the lives, practices, and horizons of media artists. As cultural workers they face increasing precarity. And yet as more wealth accumulates to the 1%, we see a new Gilded Age, exemplified by Trump and his obsession with gold decoration. Trump’s tastes are nouveau riche vulgar. But his class also uses the art market to absorb some of its capital. Art collections are viewed less as cultural artifacts than investment properties. Buying whatever is at the Biennale is a secure investment, perhaps even more than acquiring fine watches or jewelry. The expectation is that the art market will accumulate in value through both the reputation of artists and galleries.

Curiously, even when the means of art involve mechanical mass reproduction (such as Warhol’s silk screen printing, or Barbara Kruger’s early work of lithographs) these can be turned to rare unique items through appropriate recording of provenance, or printing on elite materials and limiting copies. Perhaps the most notorious example would be Matthew Barney’s *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), a set of films about 7 hours long in total, which was released as a limited series of 20 sets of DVDs which sold for at least \$100,000 as fine art.

I think there will always be a skepticism between artists and political activists. This can be healthy and productive in the long run, but it needs to be accounted for in an organizing sense. Artists tend to be individualistic, even when often working collectively in art to produce work, and to be wary of truisms and taken for granted assumptions. As with other creative intellectuals, media artists want to challenge and test ideas. This independence or orneriness is a problem for political activists seeking to get people in motion.

The always already issue of race in the U.S.

It should go without saying that in the U.S. race and class must always be talked about together.

After my talk one participant mentioned his own work showing the films of Oscar Micheaux, the pioneer black filmmaker. To dramatize the point he said he didn’t want to see D. W. Griffith’s famous/notorious film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). I understand the emotional sentiment, and support recognition and screening of Micheaux’s work, but I’d also say that everyone committed to radical film must also study and understand the power of racist works such as *Birth of a Nation*, as well as the historical context of black and progressive efforts to counteract the film. In other words, we can’t just promote an alternative, we must also actively critique the dominant. Thus the radical critique of Hollywood always has a place, if only in a “know your enemy” sense. But there’s something else to be said here. Micheaux is not automatically transparent to today’s audience, black and white and other. Fortunately, a rich collection of historical, scholarly, and critical work has been produced in the last few decades to provide a necessary background.



A new DVD collection from Kino Lorber makes an extensive collection of early African American cinema readily available. Curated by Charles Musser and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Pioneers of African-American Cinema* is a 5 disc set of “race films” produced by black filmmakers from the 1920s-1940s. Indispensible.

Another recent addition to our collective knowledge is *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, ed. Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart. It’s the print face of a distinguished archival effort to do justice to the Los Angeles based black media artists of the 1970s and 80s. Archiving and restoration of creative work was accompanied by in depth interviews with the makers. Here in the book, we find a serious reassessment of the movement, its ambitions and its accomplishments. (Full disclosure: I have an essay in the collection.)

[Editor’s note. Chuck Kleinhans wrote his plans for this essay here. He passed away before he could complete them. This talk, the Q&A, and Alex Juhasz’s introduction can be seen on video online at <https://vimeo.com/217835400?ref=fb-share>]

Separate bibliography to follow. This is a draft version posted on academia.edu on 17 May 2017. Posted at: <https://northwestern.academia.edu/ChuckKleinhans>

A revised version will be prepared for the projected *Radical Film Handbook*, ed. Steve Presence and Mike Wayne. This essay may be referenced and quoted if noted as a draft version (include date).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Chuck Kleinhans giving keynote address at Radical Film Network Conference



Indymedia activism



Brazilian International Labor Film Festival of 2017. *Trials, Exorcisms* (dir. Susana Nobre, Portugal, 2015)

Making connections: report on Radical Film Network Conference

New York City, May 3-5, 2017

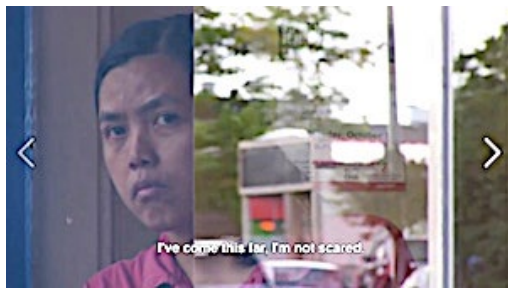
by [Chris Robé](#)

The early 2000s mark the last time media makers, critics, and activists joined in a concerted attempt to weave an international radical media network.. The most notable example, Indymedia, emerged out of the waves of organizing and activism produced by the alter-globalization movement. It served as a bunker of media activism in 1999 to report on the protests against the World Trade Organization occurring on the streets of Seattle and forced commercial media to report on police violence since amateurs with video cameras and notepads were scooping veteran reporters. Independent Media Centers (IMC) arose with each subsequent counter-summit protest and provided inspiration for countless others to join the movement, to “be the media”—as Indymedia people championed at the time.

Despite all its faults—such as the lack of infrastructure to make most IMCs sustainable, an inability to adequately address the socio-economic privilege needed to produce media without pay or adequate support, and a naïve faith in Internet technology to operate in a democratic fashion—Indymedia represented a utopian moment where anybody with access to a computer and the Internet could post content. Significantly, this happened five years before the advent of social media made such Internet activism a commonplace function.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Furthermore, Indymedia’s refusal to track users’ ISP address on its webpages provided vital security protection against government surveillance. This is a key element that’s sorely missed in the present climate. Now most activists rely upon commercial social media platforms to relay information about events and ideas, and these platforms then are endlessly data-mined by corporations and remain vulnerable to government surveillance.[2]

But as the alter-globalization movement lost momentum and the war on terror escalated, further increasing repression against socially engaged communities; as commercial services like social media far outstripped the increasingly antiquated software developed by Indymedia; as a generation of activists burnt out or simply eased into middle age where family and other responsibilities took precedence—Indymedia receded into the background, serving as a footnote to an earlier, more optimistic time where technological growth and a booming economy seemed to go hand-in-hand.

Within the last couple of years, there has been talk about revitalizing a radical global communications network. At the Fifth World Forum of Free Media held in Montreal in early August 2016, a series of panels gathered together veteran Indymedia people who contemplated a reboot of the network. Attitudes varied on the plausibility of resurrecting such an enterprise, which ran from nostalgic to the deeply skeptical. Tellingly, there was a noticeable absence of younger media



Images from *Migrant Dreams*, Canadian feature documentary directed by Min Sook Lee (2016) about the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Distributed by Cinema Politica

activists attending the panels, suggesting perhaps that Indymedia had too much baggage from the past to interest them. Likewise, a roundtable on video distribution in the era of Facebook, which I participated in, also occurred at the same event. We wrestled with the complications of having to post videos on commercial platforms. For example, we had concerns about censorship and also about losing one's material when a commercial site suddenly folds due to a variety of reasons. Government surveillance and corporate data-mining also worried many participants.

The main problem, however, in creating an independent video distribution platform is not mostly a technological one. In that regard, many of the techies who attended the roundtable assured us that such a platform could be created at an affordable price. The bigger issues were strategic. What type of content would be distributed? What type of videos? What kind of politics would be represented? How would such distribution tie into the communities using it? These primary concerns confront those attempting to create an international media network.

Similar concerns occupied those who attended the Radical Film Network (RFN) conference hosted at the Murphy Institute for Worker Education & Labor Studies in Manhattan from May 3-6, 2017. The RFN was esta

published in 2013 by two British scholars, Mike Wayne and Steve Presence. After receiving funding from an Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2015, they decided to hold a series of conferences. The first two occurred at Birmingham in 2015 and Glasgow in 2016. After NYC, they held another conference at Tolpuddle in mid-July 2017, which will be discussed at the end of this report.

During his opening remarks, Presence emphasized the three main goals of the network and its conferences: 1) raise awareness of the work participants are doing; 2) facilitate communication within the Radical Film Network community; and 3) provide outreach beyond the Radical Film Network. The term “radical,” he explained, intentionally remains broad to incorporate a wide array of cultural practices that identify a significant commitment to a Left outlook. “Film,” on the other hand, signifies more of a shorthand for film and video work.

Throughout the three days of the conference, the first goal of raising awareness was most definitely met. We were introduced to a spectrum of work and groups creating radical media within the United States, Canada, and Latin America. No panels overlapped so participants did not have to juggle conflicting interests.

The conference was intimate but informative. Overall attendance was around 100 people. This somewhat frustrated the organizers as they mentioned how they had printed 200 programs. The low attendance is somewhat surprising given that the conference was located in Manhattan, one of the media making hubs of the United States. Although the organizers attempted to engage more local alternative media making organizations, this did not come to fruition. One cause for the low numbers might also revolve around the fact that the conference was not well publicized in the United States. The event remained unannounced on list-serves like The D Word, the Caucus on Class of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, and the Union for Democratic Communications; these groups would generate interest in such an event. In fact, I only heard about it through word of mouth.

But regardless of the low overall attendance numbers, around 25-35 people attended each panel—with new people constantly rotating into the mix. The value for the participants' becoming aware of each other's work should not be underestimated. As Steve Presence emphasized during his opening remarks, many radical film organizations operate under fairly precarious conditions, particularly in light of austerity measures where federal and state funding has been drastically reduced, if not eliminated altogether; this leaves radical media organizations scrambling for donations or increasingly appealing to a sustainer base. With the global rise of reactionary populism, the outlook remains bleak.[3] Such reduced finances not only leave organizations with relatively little capital to sustain their efforts, but scarce resources also cause them to compete with one another over the scraps of funding that remain. Such competition jeopardizes coalition building and weakens the sense of community that should exist between these progressive organizations.

But even during better economic times, establishing an environment of mutual support and validation has been invaluable. For example, a summary of the 1979 Alternative Cinema Conference at Bard College could equally apply to the present conference:

“Just getting together with other people who understood what you were doing as well as what difficulties you faced doing it, and who could offer supportive criticism was a powerful experience. Knowing that there is a radical film and video community and seeing what fine, talented, concerned, and serious people are involved, and knowing that there are still others who didn't attend, made the conference an energizing experience.”[4]

The current conference did a good job of balancing the interests of those who predominantly self-identify as media makers with those who see media making as only one aspect of their activism. In regards to the former, many pragmatic concerns were raised concerning core issues of distribution, funding, sustainability, and the like. Chuck Kleinhans provided a sobering observation during his keynote presentation about media making, which is printed in full at the beginning of this *Jump Cut* section on radical activism. He said that we need to study *failed* projects, ones that were not completed either due to a lack of adequate funding and/or changing political circumstances that have rendered the project's topic irrelevant:

“I want to emphasize this because to focus too much on the individual film and filmmaker can lead to failing to plan for and account for the

difficulties of the process ... I say this not to scold, but to ask us, all of us, to wisely manage our projects. Dreams and good intentions are not enough. Hard shell realism needs to balance the hopes. So, we need to think of the whole process, to take the wide view of radical film projects.”

If anything, the conference as a whole attempted to consider this wide view. For example, a panel on exhibition accentuated that screenings must be conceived as a part of a broader practice. Elson Menegazzo of the Brazilian International Labour Film Festival noted, “Exhibition is not the last step of the process; it’s the place where radical seeds are spread.” Discussion and collective organizing after screenings are key, which is not a new idea but instead an extension of radical exhibition practices that lead back to the anticolonial organizing of Third Cinema of the 1960s and the revolutionary upheaval of the arts that took place in the Soviet Union during the 1920s as cine-trains engaged populations in remote geographical areas.

Along similar lines, Svetla Turnin of Cinema Politica, a radical exhibition network originating from Montreal, stated that their screenings have “the aim of coalition building and movement building.” For example, when screening the film *Migrant Dreams* (2016) that concerns female migrant farm labor, Cinema Politica worked with immigrant worker centers, No One Is Illegal, and other organizations to raise awareness and aim at changing Canadian federal laws to improve working conditions for farm workers.

Cinema Politica has many active, semi-autonomous chapters located mainly on university campuses. They pay a nominal fee to the head organization and must clear screenings with it also. Additional funding comes from student fees at Concordia University, some funding from the Canadian Council for the Arts, and member sustainers. Cinema Politica particularly emphasizes exhibiting films that come from inside marginalized communities, not from an outsider parachuting into a community who does not possess cultural knowledge of the community to adequately represent it. This is particularly important in regards to indigenous communities where there is a long history of (neo)colonial relationships between white filmmakers and First Nation peoples. As Turnin stated, “We try to find work that relates a deep relation of ethics of the filmmakers to the subjects.”

Funding, as one could imagine, was an issue frequently raised throughout the sessions. The difficulty in conceptualizing successful funding models was unintentionally punctuated in a schizophrenic panel on the topic that occurred on Thursday. It was comprised of a motley assembly of people from the commercial industry, who worked with government funding, and who possessed little experience with funding at all. The panelists spoke more over one another than with one another.

Perhaps the most grounded was Thomas Barlow, a co-founder of Real Media. The U.K.-based organization is comprised of twenty one media organizations and is concerned with creating an alternative media network in “a long and sustainable fashion.” Since the organization was only founded in October 2016, results remain to be seen. But Real Media plans on fundraising from small and large donors as well as trying to tap into reserve money from the BBC that is dedicated to independent media. Their efforts don’t sound unlike the work of the Film Fund, which originated in the 1970s in the United States with a very similar mission: to centralize money available to independent media makers and simplify the fundraising effort. But that organization didn’t last long since most of the revenue generated went to its high overhead. Furthermore, its progressive rhetoric didn’t align with its practices as it distanced itself from Left communities and exhibited murky political principles.[5] So hopefully Real Media can avoid such pitfalls as it engages on its mission to serve as a hub where various independent media

organizations can cooperate with one another and receive funding.

Alan Story, of WellRed Films, founded in January 2015, launched into a succinct attack regarding the limits of foundation funding of documentary films. He enumerated a series of problems that arise from such funding:

- The rote formulas of problem-solution type story structure that relies upon a main protagonist that often forecloses any sense of systemic critique of capitalism, colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.
- Those who control the funds are often not creative personnel but instead lawyers and managers who possess little to no understanding of creative work and documentary filmmaking in particular.
- The limited funding available, which normally never fully supports filmmaking expenses, creates a hostile competitive environment between filmmakers and organizations—the exact antithesis of fostering community among Left artists.

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JUMP CUT

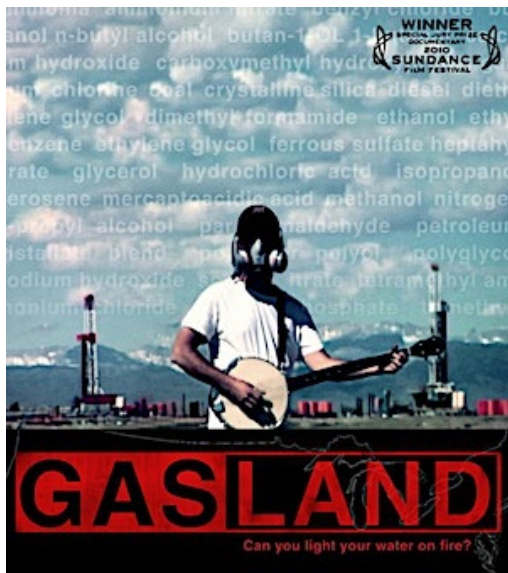
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Many filmmakers I have spoken with throughout the years and at this conference are in agreement with such a critique, but they are often reluctant to publicly state their objections since they would be critiquing the source of much of their funding. So Story's impassioned criticism was welcome. Here, Liz Canner, a documentary filmmaker spoke about her problems during a panel on radical media making, community organizing, and institution building, which I hosted. She rejected \$250,000 funding from ITVS because they quarantined her film *Orgasm Inc.* (2009) in production limbo due to their discomfort with its systemic critique of the pharmaceutical industry.

When it came to offering solutions, Story remained vague. WellRed Films wants to create "an international collaborative fund for transformative arts" based upon donations from liberals, trade unions, and rich individuals. He never said how exactly to shake these funds loose from such people and institutions and not be beholden to them. The goal would be to pool such funds to "create an artistic controlled hub and support the films with the proper political attitude." When delving into what defines the "proper political attitude," Story exclaimed, "I'm sorry. I'm a Marxist: get rid of racism. Eliminate capitalism." So it remains unclear if only Marxist films, or Marxist films according to a certain political line would be supported or if this group would offer broader support to a variety of political outlooks. Also, this scheme begs the question of what type of politics the "artistic controlled hub" would embody. Additionally, film form also remained undiscussed. Where would experimental film stand in terms of support? WellRed Films' solution seems more a theoretical fantasy at the moment than a realistic alternative.

The final two speakers had worked within the industry. Deborah Wallace had produced *Gasland* (2010) and *Blood on the Mountain* (2016). John T. Trigonis was a walking advertisement for the crowdfunding site Indiegogo. Wallace reflected upon the unlikely way in which *Gasland* became a feature film. Although it was originally conceived as a ten minute short to support the people of the Delaware Valley against hydraulic fracking, the film picked up support as the fight against fracking gained momentum. As Wallace notes, "Sometimes your project strikes lightning." But she realized that such moments are indeed rare. During the question and answer, she reflected, "Things have aligned in some ways that benefited me. I've also had some things that go nowhere." But, ultimately, she stressed that one had to put one's full effort into a project regardless of its popularity or support—something that most participants in the conference were already well aware of.

Wallace provided more of a pep talk than any kind of analysis. If anything, the unpredictable way in which some of her films received financial and industry support punctuated that support's unpredictability and unreliability. Furthermore, unquestioned were the ways in which her films that received funding tended to rely on formal conventions that many media makers in the audience rejected. For example, *Gasland's* reliance upon a central white, male protagonist who chronicles the plight of working-class families falls into a certain paternalistic vein of liberal filmmaking that has been critiqued by many radical media makers and critics. Furthermore, the film's form suggests that it is not just a strike of luck that earned *Gasland* support, but also its reliance on paternalistic conventions that undergird much liberal documentary filmmaking and that many wealthy funders find appealing.[6] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



Gasland (2010) directed by Josh Fox.

Contrasting dramatically with Wallace's reflections was Trigonis's bluster. Donning a porkpie hat and wielding a host of tech clichés, Trigonis materialized directly from the entrepreneurial id of Silicon Valley. Why someone so mismatched with the overall conference's gestalt would be invited perplexed many participants. But, if anything, his hackneyed presentation of the elixir of crowdfunding exposed the chasm of opposing assumptions that define 'good projects' according to industry-based funding sources and those of radical media makers. After leading off with the preposterous claim that "I've been behind the most successful campaigns [to crowdfund film]" and that "crowdfunding is a privilege," he followed with a series of bromides like "give investors an experience. Show them that they are a part of this film," "Make sure that shit is made well," and make films that are "innovative."

Needless to say, the criteria used to determine a well-made and innovative film remained unarticulated. One audience member questioned if avant-garde work under a crowdfunded model will simply be seen as "non-communicative" by funders, so far outside their artistic frame of reference and the realms of the conventional filmmaking that it would be unfundable. She questioned if "this crowdfunding model flattens out aesthetics into a certain limited style." Another audience member questioned the sustainability of crowdfunding. The people who support the type of politically committed, community-based documentary filmmaking that she makes are often very small, economically disenfranchised rural communities. She cannot repeatedly draw financial support from these people since they do not possess the resources to continually support the projects that she makes.

Trigonis had no response, which is not surprising since the type of crowdfunded filmmaking he advocated was diametrically opposed to the ethics of many of the radical media makers in the audience. Crowdfunding treats people as investors and potential audience members. Much radical media making fosters more sustained and intimate relationships with viewers. Crowdfunding treats the film primarily as entertainment. Radical media making emphasizes the politics of the film and video with a strong desire to mobilize people. Crowdfunding has a limited notion of "innovation" as operating within well-wrought commercial conventions and clichés, ones that often implicitly relate a reactionary political position whether it be paternalistic, reformist, colonialist, etc. in outlook. Radical media making wants to push formal conventions along different and unexpected lines that challenge narrative, character-driven commercial media making. Or at least radical media making is aware of the inherent political limitations of certain formal conventions.[7]

The crowdfunding model also mainly applies only to people who self-define as artists and media makers. It cannot address a growing number of people who do not call themselves media makers at all but simply employ media making as one element of their activism and community organizing. As technology increasingly converges into more portable devices and becomes more affordable (at least for those in the West and other privileged geographical sectors of the world), it will increasingly be integrated into on-the-ground organizing, as the recent rise of copwatching groups across the United States bears witness to.[8]

Many conference participants emphasized how media making had been integrated into collective organizing and political resistance campaigns. Oliver Ressler worked in conjunction with Dario Azzellini to produce a series of short films and installation pieces that show workers discussing their takeover of various factories in Italy and Greece. Influenced by the Argentinean factory takeovers that occurred during the early 2000s (and were captured in the film *The Take* (2004)), factory workers in Europe pursued similar strategies and tactics after the decimating effects of the 2008 Great Recession. These videos initially

appeared as a three-channel installation (http://www.ressler.at/occupy_resist/) in 2014-2015 that screened the successful factory takeovers in Europe to provide models for other workers to do the same. According to Ressler's artist statement:

"The 3-channel video installation 'Occupy, Resist, Produce' consists of three films on occupied factories in Milan, Rome and Thessaloniki. In these cases the workers did find ways to organize labor under their own control. Each film is based on discussion with the workers. The workers' assemblies – always the main decision-making bodies – were recorded. It is fundamental to recognize the differences between the situations, contexts and practices of the three worker-controlled companies, but it is also important to understand workers' control or recuperation of workplaces as a socio-political action rather than a merely economic procedure."

The videos are shot in a simple but elegant style that primarily emphasizes the workers' voices and their discussion. *Officine Zero*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiU6pCKj2MQ>)

shows the results when twenty workers occupied their factory after refusing its closure. In 2013, they deemed it an eco-social factory that specialized in the repairing and recycling of domestic appliances, computers, and furniture. The workers speak articulately about their conditions of work and their vision of the future. Their testimonies provide a sense of agency and authority on their own part. One woman, for example, speaks about how she originally became involved with the factory for its recycling program. But as she grew more familiar with its environment, she

"discovered a new project: the possibilities and bringing together workers who are normally obliged to work alone due to what they do in life."

As she speaks, the video cuts to another woman working alone, hunched over and sanding a piece of material in a long shot. Her isolation emphasizes the very condition that the former woman speaks about thus suggesting a unity between her observations and another person's working conditions. There is a brief silence so that we simply hear the woman sanding material and atmospheric noises, thus further punctuating her isolation.

Another female voice continues by saying, "You create a network and soon learn that we're all in the same boat ... There's a lack of rights at every level." The sequence cuts to reveal the woman speaking as the very same one who was just sanding in the earlier sequence, suggesting how her isolation has in part been overcome through such dialogue. By carefully juxtaposing workers' observations with carefully placed editing, the video accents how discussions among workers allow such networks of solidarity to bloom. Similarly, the video itself becomes a chain in this network building so that in addition to its production fostering workers' sharing stories within one another, its distribution and exhibition at other locations and online can also be used to inspire other factory workers who have initiated self-management at other locations. The Italian workers even mention how they plan on traveling to Argentina to discuss their occupations with those who took over factories there.

It is worth emphasizing that we rarely hear workers discuss their struggles within commercial media. With the exception of the cinema of Ken Loach, it is rare for films to pause long enough to take into account the range of debates that inform all political struggles, grassroots organizing, and community building. Effective political action is deeply dependent upon reflection and theorization. Therefore, the privileging of workers' discussions in these short videos compensates for their lack of voice in most other commercial forms of media or even worse, their

demonization within them.

Other groups like the Workers Art Coalition integrate art into blue collar workers' struggles. As Barry Cline noted, by using art for social change and in workers' daily struggles, their projects began to "convince unions to address arts and culture more." This became particularly apparent during their "Fight for 15" actions in raising the minimum wage. The artistic signs that workers designed for their actions went viral over the web (<http://www.theworkersartcoalition.com/fight-for-15.html>), providing the project with wide media coverage and an easily reproducible meme to assist in galvanizing solidarity.

Similarly, Teresa Basilo Gaztambide of Third World Newsreel and Deputy Director for New America's Resilient Communities Program emphasized,

"I consider myself as an organizer more than a filmmaker. I make films for political consciousness and to help people organize."

For example, she made a film about Puerto Rican communities dealing with gentrification in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, ground zero of hipsterism. She screened the film in Chicago before a youth summit of around 100 organizers who belonged to mostly immigrant communities. By showing how the conditions of gentrification occurring in New York were similar to those invading Chicago, the local Chicago organizers observed *systemic* forces at work and learned from other people's resistances against those forces.



Perhaps most inspiring is the way that everyday people's artistic talents have bloomed within community organizations. Paolo Davanzo, a vivacious member of Echo Park Film Center, Los Angeles, explained how his organization engaged youth in various media activities whether through screenings and discussions, renting out gear at affordable prices for production, or film classes. The results of this engagement can be witnessed in Walter Vargas' poignant super 8 experimental film *Mis Manos* (2010) (<https://player.vimeo.com/video/64771639>), showing an intimate portrait of his mother who worked at manual labor all her life. Vargas had been a member of Echo Park Film Center when he made the film.

The film opens with a close-up of a woman rubbing her pained hands, already establishing how work dominates Vargas' mother's life. A series of rapidly cut facial close-ups follow of his mother as she states,

"My name is Maria Antonia Hernandez. I'm 50 years old. I came from Mexico to Los Angeles at 17."

She speaks slowly, her exhaustion filling the pauses between her words. She lists her innumerable jobs like working in restaurants, sewing, cleaning houses, and

selling purses at swap meets. While she recounts them, we see a split screen of her lying down staring tiredly to the camera as an U.S. flag flaps wildly in a breeze beneath her image. The juxtaposition of her stasis and the flag's waving, the darkness of her room and the brightness of the flag in broad daylight, her exhaustion and endless drudgery against the flag's patriotic symbolism and representations of the American Dream reveals the hidden costs that pursuing such a dream entails. She continues, "I work five or six days of the week."

Her interview takes place as she is lying down in the near dark. At one moment she pleads with her son, "Turn that [camera] off already." He replies, "No." "What do you want to know?" "Everything," he replies. She can't help but smile.

Her fractured thoughts are emphasized by the screen frequently cutting to black. They become episodic memories of trauma and work. She states matter-of-factly,

"My hands are dark and calloused. They hurt so much at night. They're hands that worked their whole life for fifty years."

Her word choice is revealing. They are not "her" hands, but hands that worked "their" whole life, as if a separate entity from her, her very body alienated from itself through an endless amount of work. The film stresses this exploitation and alienation by ending with her hands rubbing each other in close-up. Bookended between her hands, we learn of her life, a life's history that has been mostly compressed and contained within the pain of her hands, defined by work, drudgery and exploitation. One exception is the intimate relationship we witness between mother and son on film, nurtured through the filmmaking process itself, and conjuring art and love from her misery.

Vargas's work accentuates a deeply personal yet politicized type of filmmaking, whereby an amateur filmmaker learns the skills that will propel him into a professional filmmaking career. It is one of the many roads that community-based filmmaking can lead to and exemplifies the potentialities that can be reached when media making is made accessible to community members at an early age. Such a film cannot help but be inspirational to those who make, organize around, write about, and discuss radical media.

By the conference's end, participants established a few outcomes they would like to pursue within the Radical Film Network. A central one is to further promote the network. Anyone interested in it can join the

- mailing list (<http://radicalfilmnetwork.com/mailling-list/>) ,
- Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/radicalfilmnetwork/>), and
- Twitter (<https://twitter.com/radfilmnet?lang=en>).

The Network has recently created a Vimeo page where anyone with a Vimeo account can post his/her/their videos: <https://vimeo.com/groups/463726>. The page will be moderated, according to one document,

"to ensure comments and discussions remain constructive, maintain a certain standard of quality and remove any posts from the radical right. We also need to guard against the page becoming the 'not-so-radical, progressive-liberal' Vimeo group."

Many who attended the conference intend to approach the various social movements we are a part of to see if there might be a media liaison from that group who wants to belong to the Radical Film Network. After all, if the Network is to support radical media making, it needs to align with the grassroots movements enacting progressive social change and utilizing digital technology and legacy media in their struggles. We also established some Radical Film

Network stewards in various geographical locations to field questions about the network.

The list is:

Argentina: Violeta Bruck, Contraimagen (violetabruck@gmail.com).

Brazil: Elson Menegazzo, Mostra CineTrabalho/Brazilian International Labour Film Festival (info.bilff@gmail.com).

USA

- East coast (New York): Vagabond Beaumont, independent filmmaker (vgbnd@audiovisualterrorism.com).
- West coast (Los Angeles): Paulo Danvanzo, Echo Park Film Center (info@echoparkfilmcenter.org).
- Mid-west (Ohio): Rooney Hassan, SVLLYwood Magazine (svllywood@gmail.com).
- South (Florida): Chris Robé, Florida Atlantic University (crobe@fau.edu).

If you have any questions, you can direct them to the steward nearest you.

We hope this steward system will free up the central organizers to pursue other tasks such as funding, which was also spoken about extensively, in order to make the Radical Film Network a more sustainable endeavour and not as dependent upon the vagaries of grant funding. Although we don't know where the Radical Film Network will ultimately lead, those of us interested in developing it should begin speaking about it not only online but also when we come across each other during conferences, screenings, protests, world social forums and other events. As one speaker mentioned during the conference, in the light of the surge of radical right-wing media like the Breitbart News Network and PureFlix, a Christian streaming company that has produced such religious films like *The Case for Christ* (2017) and *God's Not Dead* (2014), there has never been a stronger need for a Left-based Radical Film Network. The conference in Manhattan indicated some of the more productive avenues it might take if only we dedicate some of our time and resources to pursuing them.

During the July 2017 conference in Tolpuddle, which I did not attend, it was decided to hold the next RFN conference in Dublin July 27-29, 2018 (<https://radicalfilmmnetwork.com/conferences/>). So if interested, please contact one of the RFN stewards for more information. Furthermore, the network is organizing a global festival in honor of the 50 year anniversary of 1968 that will begin in May 2018 and continue throughout the year. The purpose of the festival, according to an internal memo, is to:

“encourage collective contemplation and reflection upon the events of 1968 and consideration of their resonance and influence now, in the popular imagination, while also allowing us to imagine how things might look 50 years from now.”

“The working model of the festival is devolved, decentred and autonomous, not completely non-hierarchical, in that there will be some central co-ordination involved, but it will invite the huge number of different individuals, organisations, political and activist groups to respond in their own way to the 50th anniversary of this potent political 'moment' in the popular imagination, by creating their own events under the banner of the RFN.”

Again, if you are interested in establishing your own 1968-related event, let one of the RFN stewards know so we can put you in touch with the central organizers. As one can see, 2018 promises to be a significant year for the RFN's growth as it pursues such global ambitions and many of its members plan to meet in Dublin in the near future. We hope to see some of you there.

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Notes

1. It should, however, be stressed that those with internet access in 2000 represented only 41.5 percent of U.S. households. Only 51 percent of U.S. households had computers. Roughly 70 percent of people in the U.S. earning \$75,000 and above had internet access at the time while only 19 percent had internet access earning less than \$15,000. Globally, only 6 percent of the population had internet access in 2000. So the term “access” is deeply classed and raced. See Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 249. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. See Christian Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (New York: Routledge, 2015) and Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and The Flag: Populism, Citizenism, and Global Protest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
3. Donald Trump announced his proposed elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities at the time of this conference; the elimination of these two organizations has long been a Republican goal tracking back to the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Clearly, the money saved by their elimination is relatively nil— particularly keeping in mind the increases Trump wants to provide the military with. But their elimination has never been about finances, but instead about ideology and punishing those people and outlooks that do not fit into a Western, imperialist, homophobic, sexist, classist, and racist outlook. Patricia Zimmerman’s chapter, “The War on Documentary,” in *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) remains the best analysis of the fallout from decimating public funding for the arts.
4. Chuck Kleinhans, Ellen Seiter, and Peter Steven, “Alternative Cinema Conference: Struggling for Unity,” *Jump Cut* 21 (Nov. 1979): <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC21folder/ReportACC.html> .
5. John Hess, “Notes on U.S. Radical Film, 1967-1980,” *Jump Cut* 21 (Nov. 1979): <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC21folder/USRadicalFilmHess.html> .
6. See Elizabeth Cowie, “The Spectacle of Actuality,” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) for a good interrogation of the some of the conventions of the liberal documentary. [[return to page 2](#)]
7. I am oversimplifying here to an extent the great diversity that constitutes Left radical media making to stress a point, but nonetheless this simplification captures many of the objections I heard throughout the conference regarding Trigonis’s presentation.
8. See my piece, “Documenting the Little Abuses: Copwatching, Community Organizing, and Video Activism,” for *PopMatters*:

<http://www.popmatters.com/feature/documenting-the-little-abuses-copwatching-community-organizing-and-video-ac/>.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



At “New York Speaks” attendees demonstrate how without net neutrality Internet “fast” and “slow” lanes could determine what information the public is able to access. Brooklyn Central Library, 27 October 2014. [Photo courtesy of the Free Press/Free Press Action Fund;* photograph by Tim Carr.]



With “fast” and “slow” lanes in place, paid entertainment content could rapidly be available to Internet users, while the information needed for democratic decision-making or presenting the perspectives of diverse communities is consigned to a slow lane. Brooklyn Central Library, 27 October 2014. [Photo courtesy of the Free Press/Free Press Action Fund; photograph by Tim Carr.]

The ongoing U.S. struggle for net neutrality

by [Lyell Davies](#)

Most of the time, decision-making about U.S. communications policy takes place without scrutiny by the general public. Not so in 2017 when, reversing this tendency, Internet net neutrality became the focus of widespread public attention, leading to mass popular organizing and activism on its behalf. The unprecedented scale of this effort indicates the presence of a growing and ever more active communications-policy focused movement in the US. The concept behind net neutrality is simple. It means that when we go online we can search for and freely find whatever we seek, without broadband ISPs such as Verizon, Comcast, Time Warner Cable, or AT&T having the ability to decide what content is available to us, or to favor some content while slowing the delivery of others. Since its widespread adoption of the Internet by the U.S. general public during the 1990s, the concept of net neutrality has been broadly embraced, and the Internet has, for the most part, been operated in a way that upholds it.

But over the years, broadband ISPs have not been *required* to uphold net neutrality on their networks. As new ways to monetize our Internet use are being developed by social media companies and other business interests, the absence of net neutrality rules offers broadband ISPs ways to create new revenue streams for their businesses at the expense of Internet users’ experiences. It was therefore of far reaching importance that in February 2015 the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) introduced Open Internet rules that mandate net neutrality; a move that *The New York Times* called “perhaps the biggest policy shift since the Internet became a reality” (Weisman 2015). The FCC’s 2015 decision did not come out of thin air. The issue had been debated and contested by policy makers, ISPs, and communications rights activists for over a decade. More pointedly, the ruling came about in response to a mass popular mobilization in favor of net neutrality, driven by communications rights and consumer organizations, Internet edge providers,[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] and millions of engaged Internet users.

Even before President Donald J. Trump’s inauguration, communications rights advocates began to prepare for a new round in the fight for net neutrality. Trump offered no coherent stance on communications policy during his presidential campaign, but for policy observers the position his administration would likely take seemed clear. Clues included his opposition to government regulation of industry, as well as the fact that the 2015 ruling was backed by the Obama Administration—making it a likely target for repeal within the partisan culture war of present day U.S. politics. Following his inauguration, Trump promoted Republican FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai to serve as the commission’s chairman. A former Verizon lawyer, from the outset Pai stated that he sought to repeal the FCC’s Open Internet rules (The New York Times 2016, December 16). In response, communication rights activism surged in 2017 as millions of people sent



Members of the public rally in support of net neutrality at “New York Speaks,” during the 2014-2015 campaign, Brooklyn Central Library, 27 October 2014. [Photo credit: Photo courtesy of the Free Press/Free Press Action Fund; photograph by Vanessa W. Chan]

emails or placed calls to regulators or elected officials, met with representatives, attended rallies, or took to the streets or sidewalks in protest.

The effort provides an important illustration of a popular mass mobilization targeting U.S. communications policy—the government rules that regulate media and communication industries. Efforts of this kind are not new to U.S. life, and antecedents for current communications activism can be found in the radio reform movement of the 1920s and 1930s, or in civil rights era campaigns to make broadcasters accountable to communities of color. But the scale of the 2014-2015 and 2017 net neutrality mobilizations are unsurpassed in scale in the history of U.S. communication rights activism. These efforts demonstrate that mass public engagement with communications policy is possible, and suggest a growing public expectation that electronic media communication, which has so deeply penetrated every aspect of our lives, should serve democracy and justice rather than undermine it.



On the eve of the FCC’s 2015 ruling, advocates for net neutrality rally outside the Time Warner building in New York City, 23 February 2015. [Photo courtesy of Media Action Grassroots Network.]

In the account that follows I briefly describe what is at stake with regard to net neutrality and an open Internet. Drawing on the work of Internet scholars and theorists, I consider what the Internet could become if net neutrality ceases to exist. I then place the present struggle for net neutrality in an historical context by describing some of the antecedents for the present mobilization, as well as how communications activism in the U.S. has been on an upswing for the last two decades. Finally, I provide a sketch of the character of the mass popular mobilization that came together in support of net neutrality and an open Internet during 2017.



At a “Net Neutrality Victory Rally” outside the FCC in Washington D.C. on 26 February 2015, advocates for net neutrality celebrate the imminent vote to pass strong net neutrality rules under Title II of the Communications Act.
[Photo courtesy of the Free Press/Free Press Action Fund.]

What’s at stake?

The term net neutrality was coined by Tim Wu to describe a condition where all content carried on the networks operated by broadband ISPs is treated the same way (2003). With net neutrality in operation, users can go where they want on the Internet, entrepreneurs are free to make new products or services available over the Internet, and broadband ISPs are not allowed to favor any particular Internet traffic. As Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, argues,

“Net neutrality maintains that if I have paid for an Internet connection at a certain quality, say, 300 Mbps, and you have paid for that quality, then our communications should take place at that quality. Protecting this concept would prevent a big ISP from sending you video from a media company it may own at 300 Mbps but sending video from a competing media company at a slower rate. That amounts to commercial discrimination... What if your ISP made it easier for you to connect to a particular online shoe store and harder to reach others? That would be powerful control. What if the ISP made it difficult for you to go to Web sites about certain political parties, or religions, or sites about evolution?” (2010:84).

Internet innovator Vinton Cerf argues that from the outset the Internet’s great success has been its openness. He argues, “The Internet was designed to maximize user choice and innovation, which has led directly to an explosion in consumer benefits;” its design “allow for the decentralized and open Internet that we have come to expect” (Cerf 2006, February 7). The FCC’s 2015 Open Internet ruling, states:

“Any person engaged in the provision of broadband Internet access service... shall not unreasonably interfere with or unreasonably disadvantage (i) end users’ ability to select, access, and use broadband Internet access service or the lawful Internet content, applications, services, or devices of their choice, or (ii) edge providers’ ability to make lawful content, applications, services, or devices available to end

users” (FCC 2015, March 12: 9).

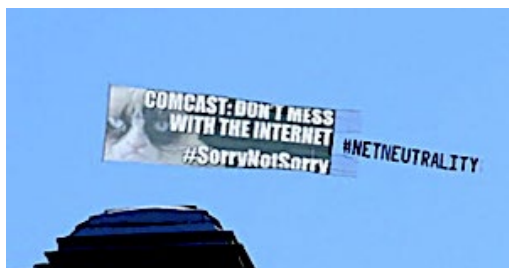
As an issue, net neutrality pits two competing views of the role of communication in our society, and the conduct of communication industries against each other. On the one side, there is a corporatist belief that the communications arena is a business like any other, and that media companies are experts on what is best for their industry so they should be left to run it as they see fit with minimal government regulation or public oversight. After all, so this argument goes, the public uses the services these corporations provide, so the public interest must be being served. On the other side, there is the belief that an ability to communicate and access information is an integral feature of the life, and should not be left entirely in the hands of self-interested, for-profit corporations. In the United States, opposition to corporate control of communications is commonly articulated in relation to democratic processes, with the argument made that the free circulation of diverse ideas and opinions is the lifeblood of a democracy.[2] This view has been championed by the nonprofit organizations engaged in the struggle for net neutrality. Drawing on deep expertise regarding the role of communications in society, these organizations identify communication rights as a necessary precondition for the exercise of the rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, informed participation in public life, and the attainment of social equality and justice.

Many precedents exist for net neutrality. New York State statutes for the operation of the telegraph from 1848 require that telegraph companies transmit all messages “with impartiality and good faith”, and “in the order in which they are received” (Nonnenmacher 2001:34). Railroads, pipelines, and shipping companies have been governed by similar ‘common carrier’ rules. Present day telephony offers a contemporary illustration of common carrier in operation. When an individual places a phone call, the telephone company must link the caller to the number they have dialed, not send them to another destination or interfere with what is said during the caller’s conversation. This is much like Internet net neutrality. Broadband ISPs provide a network for carrying content to users, and with net neutrality rules in place they cannot interfere with that content. Indeed, the 2015 ruling for an open Internet designated broadband ISPs as a ‘telecommunications service’ under the FCC’s Title II rules, which govern phone calls.



Celebrating the FCC’s 2015 ruling on net neutrality, Demand Progress, Fight for the Future, and Free Press fly a banner around Comcast’s Philadelphia headquarters. It carries an image of the Internet meme Grumpy Cat with the wording “Comcast: don’t mess with the Internet,” and the hashtag “#SorryNotSorry.” [Photo courtesy of Fight For the Future, Free Press, & Demand Progress.]

In many countries, government rules require net neutrality, and the high level of public engagement on the issue suggests that the concept is widely favored by the U.S. public. While some conservative news sources have tried to paint net neutrality as a ‘liberal’ issue (Varadarajan 2017, May 19), the free speech principles that net neutrality upholds can be seen as benefiting all people in the United States, irrespective of their political views. With some notable exceptions, [3] up to the present broadband ISPs have *generally* operated their networks in a manner that upholds net neutrality, but they were not required to do so until the FCC’s 2015 ruling. This has led net neutrality’s critics, including FCC chairman Pai, to argue that this regulation is a solution to a problem that doesn’t exist (FCC 2014, February 19). Further, Pai argues that the 2015 rules stifled investment in broadband and the deployment of new services by ISPs. His critics refute these arguments, arguing instead, “online investment and innovation boomed with those protections firmly in place” (Free Press 2017, December 14). Pai has commonly stated that the Title II rules that underlie the FCC’s Open Internet ruling are out-of-date, “Depression-Era regulations” unsuited to the digital age (Reardon 2017, February 7). The techno-determinism that underlies this argument ignores that the intent of earlier FCC rulings may be as valid today as they ever were, since the values that underlie U.S. democracy do not change with the coming or going of particular communications platforms.



Explaining the use of Grumpy Cat, Demand Progress' director of operations Mark Stanley states, "[for] whatever reason the Internet loves cats... Grumpy Cat is a viral meme representing the viral nature of the net neutrality campaign." (McQuade 2015, March 2). [Photo courtesy of Fight For the Future, Free Press, & Demand Progress.]

For people who struggle to understand what the Internet might become if net neutrality becomes a thing of the past, key Internet thinkers offer insight. Lawrence Lessig and Robert W. McChesney argue that without net neutrality the Internet will become a more curated environment, with broadband ISPs and other moneyed interests deciding what's available to users. They state:

"Without net neutrality, the Internet would start to look like cable TV. A handful of massive companies would control access and distribution of content, deciding what you get to see and how much it costs" (Lessig & McChesney 2006, June 8).

On this theme readers of *Jump Cut* should be mindful that this free and readily accessible online journal is a small not-for-profit edge provider of a kind that could become less accessible (or even inaccessible) in a pay-as-you-go, post-net-neutrality world. The politically engaged readership of the journal will also know that the organizations or social movements they support or belong to rely on an open Internet for information sharing, to support organizing efforts, and to mobilize constituents towards action. As media justice advocates Malkia A. Cyril and Joe Torres argue,

"[P]rotecting the Net Neutrality rules that keep the internet open is more critical than ever. As authoritarianism rises, digital free speech can ensure our opposition to authoritarianism also rises" (2017, March 16).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

“The cycle”



The struggle for net neutrality is reborn, rallying for net neutrality at the FCC, 18 May 2017.
[Photo courtesy of Free Press/Free Press Action Fund; photograph by Maria Merkulova.]

Placing net neutrality and the evolution of the Internet in an historical context, Tim Wu argues that if we look at the history of communication technologies in the twentieth century we soon see that the Internet is not the first platform that initially seemed to be uniquely “open” in character, or seemed to be free of centralized control or monopoly by business interests. Indeed, he argues, there have been a succession of media platforms that began as “somebody’s hobby” but moved “from jury-rigged contraption to slick production marvel; from a freely accessible channel to one strictly controlled by a single corporation or cartel—from open to closed system” (Wu 2010: 6). Wu calls this “the cycle”, a move from innovation and openness to commercialization and control by corporate forces (2010).

To understand “the cycle” as it could relate to the Internet, the story of early radio broadcasting is instructive. In a manner not so different to the techno-utopianism that is often attached today to the Internet, early radio “inspired, in the United States and around the world, an extraordinary faith in its potential as the benefactor, perhaps even savior, of mankind” (Wu 2010:36). In the 1920s, almost anyone could get a license to operate a radio station and many were “operated by nonprofit organizations like religious groups, civic organizations, labor unions, and, in particular, colleges and universities” (McChesney 1993:14). During radio broadcasting’s very early years, the advertising-driven commercial stations that would dominate the industry from the 1930s onwards were a minority among the stations in operation.[4] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] This began to change towards the end of the 1920s as commercial broadcasters pressed for regulation that would give them more control over the airwaves. Their thinking was embraced by government regulators who believed, first, radio broadcasting would best flourish if it was in the hands of private companies rather than government officials, and second, that broadcasters could be largely left to self-regulate their activities, with only a few concessions made towards using the airwaves to serve the public interest.



At a rally outside the FCC on 18 May 2017, Free Press announces, “we’ve already reached one million comments and signatures in the fight to build a massive Net Neutrality coalition once again” (Forester 2017, May 20). [Photo courtesy of Free Press/Free Press Action Fund; photograph by Maria Merkulova.]

Over a decade and a half, radio broadcasting in the U.S. was transformed from its first incarnation as an open system, to a closed system that was firmly in the hands of the big broadcasters of the period, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS). The regulatory framework adopted for radio by the early FCC was later applied to television, leading to regulations that allowed NBC, CBS, and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) to dominate broadcasting in the U.S. for the next half century; all the while pushing to near invisibility other models of broadcasting. In the eyes of the commercial broadcasters and their allies among government regulators, handing the airwaves over to the “big three” was both the best and the most natural way for things to be done.

Returning to the present, Wu cautions that if the Internet undergoes “the cycle” from an open to closed system, “the practical consequences will be staggering” (Wu 2010: 7).[5] He argues that a possible scenario is the introduction of a tiered system where Internet users have access to basic Internet service equipped with simple applications such as email for an affordable cost, with higher and higher charges introduced for access to additional content or services (Wu 2017, June 13). If net neutrality ends, this won’t happen overnight. But as pro-net neutrality FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn warns, after its demise and “as the outrage and awareness fade, you will likely see providers roll out plans and features that are inconsistent with net neutrality” (FCC 2017, December 21). There are many arguments for why we might seek to resist the dismantling of net neutrality, from communication rights and the need for freedom of expression, to ensuring that the Internet supports the innovation in products or services provided by edge providers. Not surprising then that Wu reports,

“I have met many people who are personally passionate about the open Internet, who care about freedom of speech, who care about the right to innovate. I have never met anyone, who’s not a cable lobbyist, passionate about getting rid of net neutrality” (Wu 2017, June 13).

A rise in media activism

The early days of U.S. radio broadcasting offer a second useful touchstone with regard to an examination of the mass mobilization that is presently underway for net neutrality. During the late 1920s and early 1930s a popular movement emerged, led by “[e]lements of education, labor, religion, the press, civic groups, and the intelligentsia,” to fight to ensure that a significant section of the airwaves be set aside for noncommercial and nonprofit use (McChesney 1993: 3). Ultimately unsuccessful, the radio reform movement was defeated by the introduction of the Communications Act of 1934. But had a different outcome been won, the U.S. media landscape might look very different to the way it looks today. Activism in the media policy arena did not stop in the 1930s. In the 1960s, the United Church of Christ and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People made important inroads when they challenged the depiction of African Americans in news reports on a Jackson television station, eventually winning victories in both their campaign against the local broadcaster and in establishing the precedent that the FCC must seek public input on its decision making (Aufderheide 1999: 5; Themba & Rubin 2003, Oct 30). The latter remains in place today, with the FCC required to seek public comments before implementing policy changes.

Describing the rise of recent U.S. communications activism, McChesney argues that in the 1980s a “sophisticated popular critique of the limitations of the media system” developed, along with a growing understanding that the existent “media system was inhospitable to democracy and social justice and [that if] we were serious about democracy and social justice, we had to change the media system” (McChesney 2008: 4-5). In the 1990s, the U.S. media landscape was rapidly transformed: deregulation led to increased media conglomeration; commercialism of media content was on the rise with a parallel decline in serious news reporting; and already weak public service requirements were further eroded. Deepening the concerns of those who believe that the communications arena must serve democracy and justice first and foremost, the 1996 Telecommunications Act—the most far reaching rewrite of government communications policy since the 1930s—is pro-corporate in thrust and provides license for further corporate domination of the communications arena, including over the Internet. Jeff Chester argues that in light of regulatory changes in the late 1990s and early 2000s,

“For the first time in decades, members of the public appeared at the FCC in sizable numbers, objecting to plans by the GOP majority to jettison media ownership policy safeguards” (Chester 2007:47).

The U.S. communications rights movement has grown exponentially since the turn of the millennium, drawing strength from increasing public awareness of communications policy issues, as well as from the presence of public-serving advocacy organizations such as the Center for Media Justice (CMJ), Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), and Free Press. Organizations such as these serve as a backbone of the U.S. communications rights movement, providing hubs from which to organize support or launch campaign efforts, while operating as research centers that closely follow communication policy issues and disseminate information about them to allies, the press, and the public. The effort has been energized and strengthened by the emergence of an army of Internet activists, and by organizations created to address the concerns of this constituency, such as Fight for the Future and Demand Progress—the latter co-founded in 2010 by Internet activist Aaron Swartz. For Internet activists, issues such as the preservation of online freedoms, opposition to invasive online government surveillance, and the threat of restrictive copyright rules, have been sites of struggle and repeated campaigns. Prior to the 2014-2015 and 2017 mobilizations in support of net neutrality, many of the organizations involved in net neutrality work had operated in partnership on other campaigns, such as the successful 2011-2012 effort to oppose passage of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and Protect IP Act (PIPA), or had developed informal ties through mutual involvement in convenings and conferences such as Detroit’s annual Allied Media Conference.

Another constituency playing a role in the struggle for net neutrality is edge providers. Net neutrality is key to the launch of new online services by edge providers of all sizes, as well as integral to their business model once up and running. In the absence of net neutrality, edge providers could be required to pay for access to the broadband networks they use to bring their products or services to Internet users, or find themselves competing at a disadvantage with the products or services offered by the broadband ISPs. Facing these conditions, start-up edge providers might never be able to find a foothold. The involvement of Internet companies, including some of the most profitable of their kind, highlights how the mobilization for net neutrality is heterogeneous in character. [6] While all the constituencies fighting for net neutrality appear to be willing to work in unison within a loose coalition, the involvement of powerful corporate edge providers raises numerous questions that are beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to note that there are significant philosophical differences between



Net neutrality supporters rally outside the American Enterprise Institute, where FCC Chairman Ajit Pai is speaking, 5 May 2017. [Photo courtesy of Free Press/Free Press Action Fund; photograph by Maria Merkulova.]



Outside the American Enterprise Institute, net neutrality supporters call out “Can you hear us Chairman Pai?” 5 May 2017. [Photo courtesy of Free Press/Free Press Action Fund; photograph by Maria Merkulova]



Advocates for racial and social justice argue that the FCC's "Plan to repeal Net Neutrality Ensures Discrimination for Communities of Color and Poor People" (Renderos, & Morales 2017, May 18). Members of the Center For Media Justice and allied organizations rally in Washington D.C. to oppose an end to net neutrality, 18 May 2017 [Photo courtesy of The Center for Media Justice.]



Bringing together many of the organizations and individuals fighting to maintain net neutrality is 'Team Internet', "a decentralized group of activists who are working together on our shared goal of saving Net Neutrality" (Team Internet Event Host Guide 2017).

coalition partners motivated by an altruistic belief in communication rights, and Silicon Valley edge providers for whom net neutrality is integral to their profit margin and meteoric rise as economic powerhouses.

Organizing to fight for net neutrality

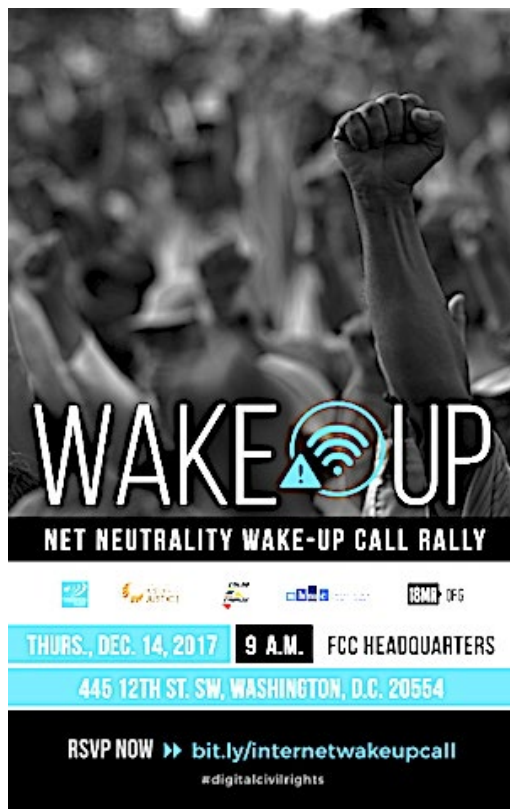
The fragile status of net neutrality has been a matter of concern since the passing of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. The issue became more pressing year-by-year as Internet users migrated from dial-up services (where they accessed the Internet using phone lines and were protected by telephony's common carrier rules) to 'triple play', where service is provided by broadband ISPs and existed without net neutrality rules until 2015. In 2005, the Save The Internet campaign reported that it had rallied "a real grass-roots coalition of more than 700 groups, 5,000 bloggers and 750,000 individual Americans" (Lessig & McChesney 2006, June 8). Still, at this time, net neutrality was not a major news story and it was "too often relegated to the business section of the paper" (Chester 2007:190). In 2010, seeking to put net neutrality on firmer ground, the Democratic controlled FCC released the Open Internet Order (FCC 2010, December 23). This poorly conceived ruling was swiftly overturned by a lawsuit initiated by Verizon. But although the judge reviewing the case found that the method used in this instance to proscribe net neutrality was not lawful under the FCC's own rules, he stated that the commission does possess the regulatory authority to require net neutrality.

Towards the end of the 2013, net neutrality became a front page major news story when Netflix accused Comcast of deliberately slowing the delivery of its video-on-demand service to users; a problem that was only remedied when Netflix paid for better access to Comcast's network. In early 2014, the issue heated further, with the FCC making tentative moves to introduce what net neutrality advocates saw as another weak set of net neutrality rules. This led to an outpouring of public engagement on the issue as Internet users deluged the blogosphere with expressions of outrage at the FCC's plan.

"[M]ore than a hundred Internet companies, from smaller tech firms like Etsy and Tumblr up to older authorities like Google, Microsoft, and eBay, wrote the Commission to signal their dissatisfaction with the proposal" (Wu 2014, May 9).

During the summer and fall of 2014, public pressure for strong net neutrality rules mounted. An aggressive campaign using the moniker the "Battle for the Net" was mobilized, with the FCC reporting that it had received nearly four million public comments on net neutrality, the most ever on a single issue up to that time (FCC 2014, December 23). In November 2014, the Obama Administration issued a statement indicating support for an open Internet (The White House 2014, November 10), and in February 2015, the FCC introduced 'bright line' rules to ensure net neutrality, classifying broadband ISPs as a 'telecommunication service' under the Title II of the Communications Act. The issue was settled, or so it seemed.

In the first months of the Trump Administration's rule, many aspects of U.S. communications policy were upended, although, with the cornucopia of upheavals occurring at the time, it would be easy for the public to miss what was happening. With its new chairman at the helm, the FCC opted not to bring into effect Internet



In response to an impending vote on the future of net neutrality, Team Internet calls for a “Net Neutrality Wake-Up Call Rally” at the FCC on 14 December 2017.

privacy rules introduced the previous fall that require “high-speed internet providers like AT&T and Comcast to secure their customers’ data against hacking and other unauthorized uses” (Kang 2017, March 1). The FCC acted to do the following:

- undermine features of the Lifeline program which subsidizes the cost of affordable phone and Internet services for low income individuals;
- withdraw FCC support from efforts to hold down the cost of intrastate prison phone calls; and
- scrap a proposal that would allow cable users to save money by buying cable boxes rather than renting them.

Some of these major policy turnarounds were “buried in the agency’s website and not publicly announced, stunning consumer advocacy groups and telecom analysts” (Kang 2017, February 5). The message was clear: the FCC would follow “the Trump administration’s rapid unwinding of government regulations” (Kang 2017, February 5).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Noting Pai's friendliness to the telecommunications industry, the Editorial Board of *The New York Times* stated,

"Congress created the F.C.C. to help all Americans obtain access to communication services without discrimination and at fair prices. Mr. Pai's approach does exactly the opposite" (2017, February 10).

In early 2017, senior Democratic senators indicated that they support net neutrality and expect a major fight if Republicans try to dismantle it (Reardon 2017, February 7). In response to the developing threat to net neutrality, communication rights advocates began to mobilize a national campaign on the issue as they had in 2014-2015. With the organizations active in the earlier fight providing leadership and infrastructure, the campaign quickly reconnected with a base of supporters. Using the campaign slogan "Team Internet", supporters coalesced into "a decentralized group of activists who are working together on our shared goal of saving Net Neutrality" (Team Internet Event Host Guide 2017). With activism on the upswing, on April 20 protestors attended an event at the FCC where Chairman Pai was speaking. To the tune of Rick Astley's 1987 song "Never Gonna Give You Up", the protestors "rickrolled" Pai, singing, "Never gonna give you up, Net Neu-tral-ity, never gonna run around and hurt you," until they were ejected from the building by police and Homeland Security officers.



On 7 December 2017, in opposition to the FCC's imminent move to end net neutrality, more than 700 protest actions are staged in 50 states, "the largest public outpouring of support for Net Neutrality and internet freedom ever" (Aaron 2017, December 8). [Photo credit: the author]

In May, the FCC formally announced its plan "to reverse the FCC's 2015 decision to impose heavy-handed Title II utility-style government regulation on Internet service providers," by returning ISPs to the status of Title I "information provider" and thereby exempting them from net neutrality rules (2017, May 18). At a rally outside the FCC on May 18, the organization Free Press announced, "we've already reached one million comments and signatures in the fight to build a massive Net Neutrality coalition once again" (Forester 2017, May 20). Also by

May, a quarter of the U.S. Senate had signed on to “a series of powerful letters calling out Chairman Pai on his terrible plan to scrap the Net Neutrality rules” (Floberg 2017, May 9). Among these were women senators who argued that “Net neutrality is particularly important to women,” especially to those operating women-owned businesses or seeking to bring about positive change in their communities (Floberg 2017, May 9).



In New York City, hundreds rally in support of net neutrality outside a Verizon store on 42nd Street, 7 December 2017. [Photo credit: the author]



Team Internet draws support from a broad range of constituents. *The New York Times* reports that some of the “most vocal and committed activity may have come from generation internet, the digitally savvy teenagers in middle and high school who grew up with an open internet” (Kang 2017, December 20). [Photo credit: the author]

In July, Team Internet organized a national day of action on the issue, on which the public was called on to submit comments opposing the FCC’s plan to the FCC and Congress. The day broke records for net neutrality activism, with five million emails and 124,000 phone calls directed to Congress, and two million more emails sent to the FCC (Cuthbert 2017, July 13). This is triple the largest number of comments submitted in a single day during the 2014-2015 campaign (Cuthbert 2017, July 13). Coalition partner CMJ announced, “Some estimates even report that social media posts about the Day of Action reached a potential 2.44 billion people!” (2017, July 14). The racial justice-focused CMJ states that on the day of action “thousands of people of color and civil rights leaders raised our voices... We’ll keep joining with allies of all kinds across the lines of difference to fight for our digital voice” (2017, July 14). By the end of July over ten million comments had been filed with the FCC, many more than during the campaign for net neutrality two years earlier (Reardon, 2017, July 20).^[7][\[open endnotes in new page\]](#)

Driving these efforts were communications rights organizations—such as CMJ, Demand Progress, EFF, Fight for the Future, Free Press, and Public Knowledge. They were joined by civil society organizations including Color of Change, Common Cause, Creative Commons, Greenpeace, NARAL, the National Hispanic Media Coalition, New America, Rock the Vote and the Women’s March. Among the edge providers involved were: Airbnb, Amazon, CREDO, eBay, Etsy, Expedia, Facebook, Kickstarter, Mozilla, Netflix, OKCupid, reddit, Soundcloud, Spotify, Tinder, Twitter, Vimeo and Yelp. Illustrating something of the varied constituencies involved in the campaign, *The New York Times* reports that some of the “most vocal and committed activity may have come from generation internet, the digitally savvy teenagers in middle and high school who grew up with an open internet” (Kang 2017, December 20). For these young people, “a dry issue that has often been hard to understand outside of policy circles in Washington has become a cause to rally around” (Kang 2017, December 20). Other commentators



This protestor's sign reads, "Sorry employees my beef's not with you." [Photo credit: the author]



Supporters of net neutrality argue that the threat to net neutrality is a threat to free speech. [Photo credit: the author]

noted that support for net neutrality crosses party lines, and following the release of the FCC's plan "a post on net neutrality raced to the top of Reddit's NASCAR forum becoming the subreddit's most popular post ever—by a long shot" (Coren 2017, November 28). Free Press's Craig Aaron argues,

"We're witnessing a huge political shift on this issue. Public awareness has never been higher. And the politicians and press are paying attention" (2017, December 8).

Created to represent the public in matters of communications governance, the FCC's mission is to ensure that all members of U.S. society have access to communication platforms, and for a fair price. Critics of the FCC argue that historically it has too often advanced "the interests of the various corporate sectors it oversees," rather than serving the public interest (Chester 2007:48). Patricia Aufderheide argues that "[t]he public is endlessly invoked in communications policy, but rarely is it consulted or even defined" (1999: 5). She reports that over the years the FCC's commissioner have sometimes acted "as allies of and... protectors of the weak and vulnerable in society," but the agency has not fulfilled its public service mission as well as it should (Aufderheide 1999: 6). In response to the millions of comments submitted to the FCC in support of net neutrality in 2017, Pai stated that the numbers were not paramount for him, and it would be quality of the submissions not the quantity that would be decisive in the FCC's decision on net neutrality. One journalist noted that this stance could be "an excuse to ignore the overwhelming millions of comments in support of net neutrality in favor of few well-written filings by Comcast and the like." (Kastrenakes 2017, August 31).

On November 22 the FCC presented the deceptively titled, net neutrality-ending "Restoring Internet Freedom" order, to be confirmed by a vote by the five FCC commissioners in mid December. Critics of the order immediately countered that it ignored "the voices of millions of Internet users who weighed in to support those protections" (McSherry, Walsh, Stoltz, & Falcon 2017, November 27). Free Press reports that in the week following the release of the order over 600,000 calls were placed to members of Congress through the Battle for the Net's automated call-tool; so many that "some Capitol Hill staffers have asked us to make the calls stop" (Martínez 2017, December 1). On December 7, in opposition to the FCC's action, more than 700 protest actions were staged in 50 states, "the largest public outpouring of support for Net Neutrality and internet freedom ever" (Aaron 2017, December 8).



On 14 December 2017, immediately before the FCC will vote to end net neutrality, protesters rally outside the commission's Washington office building. [Photo courtesy of Free Press/Free Press Action Fund; photograph by Maria Merkulova.]

The following week, immediately before the order was to be voted on by the five FCC commissioners, protesters rallied outside the commission's Washington office building. Among the speakers at the assembly were Democratic FCC Commissioners Mignon Clyburn and Jessica Rosenworcel. The latter stated, "I'm bothered by the incredible contempt this agency has shown the American people who have turned out in droves to make one thing clear: They want Net Neutrality" (Kroin 2017, December 15).

The future

On December 14, the FCC voted by a 3-2 margin, split along Republican-Democrat party lines, to adopt the "Restoring Internet Freedom" order. In a dissenting statement, Commissioner Clyburn stated that with the "fiercely-spun, legally-lightweight, consumer-harming, corporate-enabling *Destroying Internet Freedom Order*" the FCC is "abdicating responsibility to protect the nation's broadband consumers... handing the keys to the Internet... over to a handful of multi-billion dollar corporations" (2017, December 14). She concluded her statement with,

"[W]e will look back on today's vote as an aberration, a temporary deviation from the bipartisan path, that has served us so well. I don't know whether this plan will be vacated by a court, reversed by Congress, or overturned by a future Commission. But I do believe that its days are numbered" (Clyburn 2017, December 14).

In the short period that separates these last events from the time of writing this article, the issue of net neutrality has not receded from public discourse. Shortly after the FCC's ruling, initiatives were afoot to press Congress to reverse the FCC's move, and Free Press, Public Knowledge and the National Hispanic Media



Dissenting from the FCC's decision, Commissioner Clyburn states that with the "fiercely-spun, legally-lightweight, consumer-harming, corporate-enabling *Destroying Internet Freedom Order*" the FCC is "abdicating responsibility to protect the nation's broadband consumers... handing the keys to the Internet... over to a handful of multi-billion dollar corporations" (2017, December 14). [Photo courtesy of Free Press/Free Press Action Fund; photograph by Maria Merkulova.]

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Coalition promised legal action on the matter (Kang 2017, December 14). Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer pledged to bring a bill to the Senate floor to undo the repeal of the 2015 Open Internet rules, and representatives in the House, Senate, and in state capitols indicated they intend to take steps to keep net neutrality (Free Press 2017, December 15). Additional action is certain in the months to come.

Communication policies are always in flux, and vigilance and a willingness to actively engage with them and to encourage others to do likewise is the order of the day, every day. The 2014-2015 campaign for net neutrality illustrates that effective coalition building by communication rights activists, engaged members of the public and other constituents can press those who regulate communication industries to enact policies that serve the public. The effort in 2017 to preserve net neutrality illustrates the magnitude of the challenge at hand when it comes to promoting communication rights and fostering democratic media in the United States. The issue of net neutrality is making millions of people aware of how communications policy is written, and how decision makers can be challenged if they ignore the public's wishes. Many among these individuals have demonstrated a willingness to take action by submitting comments to the FCC or their elected officials; airing their views in social media forums; attending rallies or engaging in acts of online or real-world protest; or by joining and supporting the network of communications rights organizations that serve as the backbone of "democratic media activism"[8] within a movement for communications rights in contemporary U.S. society.

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Notes

1. This term denotes the companies or other entities that provide content, applications, or other online services over the Internet. Companies such as Amazon, Facebook, Google, or YouTube are among the most prominent edge providers, but the term also applies to the tens of thousands of other operations, large or small, that provide Internet content. The FCC states, the term edge provider is used because operations such as these “generally operate at the edge rather than the core of the network”—the latter being the domain of ISPs, transit providers, and related entities (2010, December 23). [[return to page 1](#)]

2. In contrast, in the European context there is a greater willingness to argue that an ability to freely send and receive messages through electronic media channels is a fundamental human right and need, rather than a mechanism of democracy.

3. See, for instance, the Associated Press’s 2007 investigation of Comcast’s slowing of BitTorrent users’ data.

4. A survey in 1926 “determined that approximately one-half of U.S. stations were operated to generate publicity for the owner’s primary enterprise, while one-third were operated by nonprofit groups for eleemosynary purposes. Only 4.3 percent of U.S. stations were characterized as being ‘commercial broadcasters,’ while a mere one-quarter of U.S. stations permitted the public to purchase airtime for its own use” (McChesney 1993:15). [[return to page 2](#)]

5. “The cycle” is not limited only to whether or not net neutrality exists. In recent years our Internet experience has dramatically changed in ways that illustrate that “the cycle” is already well underway—changes that would likely be accelerated and deepened by an end to net neutrality. Eli Pariser argues, “What was once an anonymous medium where anyone could be anyone... is now a tool for soliciting and analyzing our personal data” (2011: 6). Social media companies seek to hold our online attention at all costs, so our “eyeballs” can be sold to advertisers. Following revelations about the influence of fake news and foreign-originated misinformation during the 2016 election, we have witnessed in recent months widespread public and governmental concern about how our online experience has evolved—particularly with regard to the role social media companies play as information brokers. It is troubling that at a time when there is a growing awareness that social media companies are in need of effective oversight, moves are afoot to dismantle net neutrality, thereby allowing ISPs to become equally irresponsible information brokers—as they put profits ahead of U.S. society’s need for open, democratic and democracy-serving communication.

6. In the mass campaign mobilized in support of net neutrality during 2017, the involvement of the biggest Internet companies was more subdued than in the past and “Instead of forceful pleas from their executives, like those in years past on this issue,” they largely expressed their opposition to Pai’s plan “through their trade group, the Internet Association” (Kang 2017, November 28). In their place, more recent start-ups, including such well-known ones as Airbnb, Twitter and Reddit

took an active role in warning regulators that an end to net neutrality would hurt innovation and the economy (Kang 2017, November 28).

7. When the period for submitting public comments to the FCC closed in August 2017, over 20 million comments had been submitted. However, while legitimate submissions overwhelmingly showed support for net neutrality, the FCC's comments system had been targeted by a "spambot" that sent massive numbers of identical anti-net neutrality comments "using the identities of people who have no idea their names have been attached to these comments" (Cox 2017, May 10).

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8. Media scholars Robert A. Hackett and William K. Carroll propose the term "democratic media activism" (DMA) to describe all strands of communications activism. They define DMA as a "force of *media democratization*, which comprises efforts to change media messages, practices, institutions and contexts (including state communication policies) in a direction that enhances democratic values and subjectivity, as well as equal participation in public discourse and societal decision-making" (2006:84).

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JUMP CUT

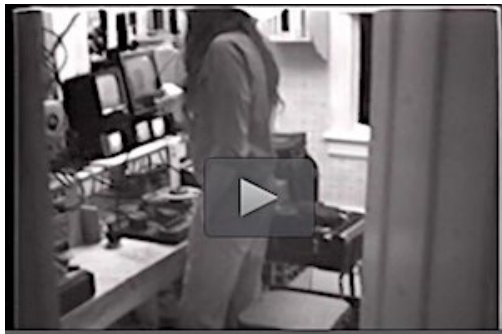
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Newsreel's production, *Finally Got the News*, dir. Stewart Bird and Peter Gessner (1970).



The Media Mobilizing Project in Philadelphia operates according to the philosophy: "Movements begin with the telling of untold stories."



Oppositional media practices

by [Patricia R. Zimmermann](#)

Review of *Breaking the spell: a history of anarchist filmmakers, videotape guerrillas, and digital ninjas* by Chris Robé (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2017).

Breaking the Spell: A History of Anarchist Filmmakers, Videotape Guerrillas, and Digital Ninjas focuses on oppositional media organizations as they intervene, intersect, and engage moments of unresolved political and social conflicts provoked by neoliberal onslaughts.

This book offers an important reminder for media scholarship to move beyond the text to larger institutional frameworks and contexts. And it forcefully presents an argument that documentary work done in the spheres beyond festivals and public television deserves some attention. It's hard to think of another book analyzing radical, alternative, or political media that covers so many organizations and interviews so many practitioners who share their conflicts, critiques, and problems so openly.

The book traces linkages between groups often considered separately in the scholarly literature on radical media and insurgent documentary. It brings new important emerging 21st century organizations to the fore such as the Media Mobilizing Project, VozMob, and Outta Your Backpack Media. It is one of the few books on radical or political media practices to interweave environmentally-oriented media organizations into the histories of oppositional media practices. Impressively, Robé conducted over ninety interviews with media practitioners working within different organizations, an important ethnography that moves beyond textual analysis into institutional history. Their voices crack open the continuing problems and challenges of race, gender, class, sexualities, identity rippling through these organizations, a significant and valuable contribution that grounds this book in the continuing struggles confronting these groups..

The book's writing style and analytical approach display a very accessible and even urgent pedagogical feel, where chapters read as though they emerged from teaching these works and needing to explain their urgency and their rough aesthetics to students. Robé argues for understanding oppositional media practices through the nexus of politics, technology, political movements, organizations, and media works. He offers a roadmap to faculty and community media groups who want to devise courses introducing students and the next generation to these important legacies and political struggles. It also provides a way in to a somewhat complex and often ignored landscape of political media groups across a fifty-year time span.

At conferences and in most journals (*Jump Cut* being the exception), film, screen, and documentary studies often sideline nonprofit and political media art organizations. These fields seem to prefer analysis of a single film with textual and structural complexities that circulates within and is validated by the international



1970s pirate TV station run by Videofreex in the Catskill Mountains, using a Portapak and a transmitter given to them by Abbie Hoffman. The group ran 258 shows.



Four More Years (1972), depicting the Republican National Convention, was produced by Chicago video collective TVTV using Portapaks. Available from Videodata Bank and Mediaburn in Chicago.



1999 Indymedia production of 2.5 hour documentary on WTO protests in Seattle. The five half-hour segments were shown on cable access TV.

festival circuit. A *de facto* auteurism—or perhaps latent neoliberal individualism if we adopt Robé’s argument—renders collectives, collaborative projects, and political groups making media almost invisible. In equal measure, much scholarship in these fields has also not fully embraced community media, activist projects, or advocacy documentary with its more on-the-ground, driven-by-political-struggle rough-hewn approach and style. These works rarely surface in museum and festival programming.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Breaking the Spell offers a welcome shift in the scholarly ecology outlined in broad strokes above. It tracks and unpacks a fifty-year plus history of what Robé categorizes as “anarchist-inflected” radical media organizations and projects working in video. He defines anarchism as direct action, participatory democracy, and consensus decision-making (6). He identifies these as salient operating principles across a range of media organizations across many different historical periods. The book steers clear of community-based video, collaborative video projects, and advocacy work in organizations such as Scribe Video or WITNESS. Instead, it sets its course on projects produced during moments of political uprisings mostly in the United States, with a few projects from Canada.

The notion of anarchism deployed in this book feels somewhat forced. It reads like a top-down abstract theorization attached to very different kinds of practices from a scholar looking for a unifying model to understand a diverse range of organizations rather than a set of complex processes emerging from the organizations themselves. Although anarchist thought has a long history and trajectory, the book never makes explicit the connection between the political work of these media organizations and this history except to argue their consensual and non-hierarchical practices resonate with and evoke this tradition.

Breaking the Spell launches a very ambitious intellectual undertaking. It splices together a critique of neoliberalism, many different critical theorists such as Stanley Aronowitz, Walter Benjamin, Manuel Castells, Julia Garcia Espinosa, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Marx, Slavoj Žižek, various political movements, a wide swathe of documentary and communication scholars, histories of neoliberalism, and anarchist philosophy. Robé adroitly maneuvers between all these different scholarly registers as he moves through the decades. His fluency with so many bodies of knowledge in documentary, communications, political theory, history, and philosophy helps the reader to understand why these organizations matter as forces against neoliberalism.

However, the force of the book’s argument about anarchist-inflected video is often weighed down with an overemphasis on reviews of the existing literature, excessively long quotes, and sweeping explications of neoliberalism, corporatization, and radical politics. At times, the book reads like a clever remix of all these ideas rather than a compelling argument that justifies the significance of why the uninitiated reader should pay attention to anarchist-inflected video produced over the last fifty years.

A key theme throughout the book centers on the intersections between race, class, gender, identities, and technologies. This strategy provides a way to understand fifty years of activist video as marked by struggle, debate, and conflict rather than as an utopian, conflict-free, steady advance towards better and better activist practices. It spans film and video activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, guerrilla video, AIDS activism, the first war in Iraq in the early 1990s, eco-video in

the Pacific Northwest, the rise of Indymedia in the late 1990s, meme creation, projects using cellphones to chronicle Latino/a workers, and the work of Canadian media activist Franklin Lopez. The book argues that anarchist tendencies and political actions connect these various practices across different historical periods.



Gulf Crisis TV Project (1990-91), produced by Deep Dish TV. The collected videos are now on Vimeo [<https://vimeo.com/album/4093685>]. Video series presents U.S. political history, media and censorship, decline in US economy, Arab American life, grassroots organizing, U.S. foreign policy, energy corporations and U.S. military ties.

With such a large time frame, questions of historiography arise: these movements and periods need to be positioned and their significance explained. *Breaking the Spell : A History of Anarchist Filmmakers, Videotape Guerrillas, and Digital Ninjas* presents a sweeping, epic historical recovery project that works hard to make links between the rise of neoliberalism and the emergence of resistance to it by political groups and media organizations in the United States and Canada. Robé explains neoliberalism as a new economy based on flexible accumulation, fragmentation, precarity the service economy, information, and networks (8-11). The book traverses through a large historical evolution of accessible media technologies from 16mm to PortaPaks to camcorders to cable television to public access to satellite to cellphones, each discussed as presenting opportunities for radical interventions into discourse and practice. These technologies aid in the construction of new social imaginaries within the specific interventionist politics of the anti-war, ecology, AIDS, working class, immigrant, indigenous, and anti-globalization movements. Robé contends that each of these movements pushed against and protested the effects of the neoliberal project of late capitalism.

As it travels through the decades, organizations, people, politics, movements, and media projects, the book combines the close textual analysis strategies of film studies with cultural studies and ethnographic methodologies. The book provides an institutional and organizational analysis of these various entities. This strategy combining three different methodologies situates the organizations and their films/videos within questions of infrastructure and engagement with larger political struggles. With so much research in documentary studies often obscuring questions of organizational infrastructure and sustainability, *Breaking the Spell* offers useful information grounded in day-to-day operations of various groups, aligning itself with scholarship on institutional histories of media beyond

commercial sectors.

To dig into how these groups actually operate and how people involved in them consider their own work within them, Robé interviewed ninety people involved in these organizations. The quotes pulled from the interviews reveal ongoing political strategy debates as well as continuing unresolved conflicts with race, class, gender, and identities. The interviewees' insights counter the naïve utopianism that often obfuscates analysis of political media. The book is particularly strong on following the administration, operations, and tactics of these organizations from production to distribution to exhibition, elaborated in detail by the interviewees. These interviews expose a cauldron of debates at the ever-changing nexus of technologies, politics, and identities.

Beyond these useful oral histories, each chapter includes close textual analysis of a representative video from each organization. Early on in the book, Roble contends that these videos are often not “considered the most important part of the process” (13). Instead, distribution, reception, and use value become more salient and pressing, ways of mobilizing people, arguments, and evidence. He argues.

“activist video does not simply represent collective actions and events but also serves as a form of activist practice in and of itself” (14).

The book begs a big perennial question lurking underneath any analysis of activist media: is this kind of media production simply a gateway to work in mainstream media and a media career, or does it actually work in tandem with the harder, less glamorous, long-time frame of on-the-ground political organizing?[2] Some interviewees in the book criticize those who move from activists to freelancers for larger media corporations. *Breaking the Spell* prefers to stay within the domains of media production as either a practice of direct action in and of itself or a documentation of direct action.

The textual analyses of various films and videos are the weakest and least interesting parts of the book. Sometimes, the analysis spans many pages, offering detailed description but insufficient analysis. At other times, it is not clear as to the significance of why a certain show or film was selected and how the analysis advances the argument. Rather than looking at patterns across a range of works produced by an organization and then arguing for a video as representative of major trends or developments, the individual analysis of videos read as overly elaborated singular examples.

However, to be fair, it should be noted that if one were to teach a course in anarchist radical video history, the list of works analyzed would provide a quite useful pedagogical trajectory for an undergraduate syllabus: *Finally Got the News* (1970), *May Day Realtime* (1971), *Four More Years* (1972), *Testing the Limits* (1987), *Gulf Crisis TV Project* (1990), *Cascadia Alive* (1996), *Showdown in Seattle* (1999), *The Miami Model* (2004), *Picture the Homeless* (2004), *Taxi Workers: A New Era* (2009), *Skary Skool* (2009), *END:CIV* (2011).

To make the case for the connection between neoliberalism and the rise of radical media that confronts it, Robé argues “Chile represents the economic primal scene for global restructuralization” (23). Chapter One starts with the 1973 overthrow of socialist Salvador Allende in Chile and the resulting ascent of neoliberalism. He maintains the importance of theories of third cinema for promoting participation among makers and spectators. The chapter then moves to Newsreel, a filmmaking collective started in the late 1960s to make films about the anti-war and anti-racist movement, and its relationship to New Left politics in the United States in the 1960s. He claims its adoption of a rough aesthetic approach can be understood in relation to Julio Garcia Espinosa's imperfect cinema. It should be

noted that he is not making a historical claim, as the essay was translated into English after much of Newsreel's work appeared, but rather using this theoretical model as a way to explain why these films are not polished in terms of style. An extended analysis of *Finally Got the News* unpacks conflicts between white middle class producers and their working class subjects.

Chapter Two looks at video guerrillas and eco-media projects such as Videofreex, Global Village, Top Value Television, and Ant Farm in late 1960s and early 1970s. It argues that their organizations employed anarchist principles of decentralization, anti-hierarchical structures, anti-bureaucracy, and small communities. Focusing on the Videofreex and their work establishing Lanesville TV, a low-fi station in upstate New York, the chapter points out that this work emphasized process over product, with long takes and intimate interactions (88). The chapter shows how debates opened up between those "who saw video at service to the people and those who saw it as an artistic process simply serving themselves" (93). The chapter touches on how documentarian George Stoney's stint at Challenge for Change in Canada propelled him upon his return to the United States to found the Alternative Media Center at New York University in 1970 with Red Burns.

Chapter Three focuses on the 1980s, in particular ACT UP and AIDS video activism, Paper Tiger TV, Deep Dish, and the Gulf Crisis TV Project.[3] Robé advances that this period of the 1980s "marks a moment where a more widely accessible, spectacle-based video activism will become a new paradigm for many future forms of direct action video" (123). He observes that ACT UP and AIDS activism, in organizations such as Testing the Limits Collective, DIVA TV, and WAVE constitute the site where "bodies and signification entwined" (124). These groups focused on a narrowcasting to specific marginalized communities and constituencies rather than broadcasting model of reaching a mass audience. The chapter sees Paper Tiger TV as promoting "quick and economical media production" (127), handmade with consumer-grade gear. This period of the 1980s and 1990s also was a time of massive commercial media concentration. In response, Free Speech TV, a twenty-four national television network and multiplatform project for progressive independent news and documentary developed in 1995.



With the camera askey and the videographer on the ground, the police baton is aimed at the camera. *The Miami Model* is the title of a 2004 Indymedia

documentary reporting on the 2003 Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting in Miami and the protests it engendered. It is also the name of a extremely aggressive policing policy against demonstrators developed in Miami for the 2000 Republican National Convention.

Chapter Four concentrates on the Northwest of the United States during the 1990s and 2000s, an under-researched region for independent media. The chapter discusses Eugene Media, an environmental activist group employing the principles of deep ecology. Although the chapter praises this group, many environmental activists in the Northwest and across the United States see the group as self-righteous, obnoxious, and overly masculinist, critiques Robé does not engage. The chapter offers an interesting point about the “rough form” and “open production process with amateurs and activists in this work” (190). As the face of the neoliberalist agenda, the World Trade Organization formed in 1995, the largest international economic group in the world promoting trade flows between countries. The rise of Indymedia during the Seattle anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) demonstrations in 1999 is analyzed as a convergence between anti-neoliberal organizing and technological breakthroughs in microelectronics and software. The interviews with participants uncover the racial and class privileges of those working in Indymedia, as well the tensions between sharing material or selling it to more commercial outlets. Videos like *Showdown in Seattle*, *The Miami Model*, and *Breaking the Spell*, according to Robé “prioritize activism and urgency over well-honed production and artistic expertise” (228).

The notion of the meme, an idea or concept that circulates and moves, emerges in Chapter Five. Roble contends that meme organizations appear in the 2000s. They construct “narratives that galvanize a wider public to engage in social justice” (263). The chapter also looks at community-based groups who share media making skills with each other and activists experimenting with form. Not an Alternative, a Brooklyn nonprofit, connects the local with the global, especially in a project entitled “Picture the Homeless.” SmartMeme in San Francisco functions as a training collective to amplify messaging of political actions through meme creation.

The Media Mobilizing Project in Philadelphia deploys radio, the internet, video, and cable “for the working class to mobilize on workers’ rights, affordable and quality education” (291). Their project *Taxi Workers: A New Era* (2009) shows stories from the ground up emerging from poor people’s organizing movement and DIY media production. Los Angeles-based Mobile Voices, also known as VozMob, marshalls cellphones to counteract anti-immigrant actions so that immigrants can tell their own stories. Flagstaff, Arizona-based Outta Your Backpack is a youth led, indigenous-centered skill sharing group. Works like *Skary Skool* and *Inner Voices* elaborate indigenous youth empowerment. All of these groups constitute important forces in the new oppositional media landscape, as they have figured out how to marshal new amateur technologies with scalable and sustainable practices. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Canadian Media Co-op Movement, influenced by the horizontally dispersed structures of Indymedia.



Outta Your Backpack Media, teaching media skills to Native American youth.

Perhaps the weakest of all the chapters, Chapter Six focuses almost exclusively on Canadian media activist Franklin Lopez in the context of what Robé dubs “video ninjas” anarchist-inflected makers who exemplify the tensions “between freelancers and production outlets” (346). This focus on one auteur seems out of joint in a large volume emphasizing political media groups and organizations rather than individuals. This chapter points out that the 2008 economic meltdown made it difficult for independent media producers to survive. Free Speech TV, often seen as a viable model organization circulating independent media on progressive political issues, enacted massive layoffs in 2009. The book positions Franklin Lopez, who worked with Indymedia and then SubMedia, as an exemplar of anarchist media practice. Robé argues Lopez’s aggressive videomaking style blends “political hip hop and the avant garde” (395).

The book concludes with the 2011 Occupy Wall Street (OWS) action, analyzing the organization of media around this action. For Robé, OWS offers the concluding example of “anarchist-inflected” media with its emphasis on consensus, direct action, and non-hierarchical structures.

At a hefty 459 pages, *Breaking the Spell: A History of Anarchist Filmmakers, Videotape Guerrillas, and Digital Ninjas* covers half a century of video practice outside mainstream broadcast, art cinemas in festivals, and individual documentary auteurs. However, the book suffers from some argumentative and theoretical weaknesses. With more strategic structural editing to reduce the overwriting, over-explaining, and over-quoting, *Breaking the Spell* might have more potential to move beyond activist circles to influence scholarship in documentary studies as well as festival and museum programming. The imposition of the anarchist model of political organization often gets repetitive and feels forced. The interviewees do not elaborate their anarchist principles; it is more the case that what they say aligns with and implies anarchist principles.

As a result, the diversity of organizations and the specificities of historical periods wafts away because the analysis keeps pushing the issues of neoliberalism and anarchist responses. As a book claiming to recover a lost history, Robé’s insistence on radical anarchist political media pushes historiography to the background: the significance of each of these various organizations and movements is rarely explained except as an example of a battleground against neoliberalism. The periodization is neither justified nor argued, as it is for the most part assumed.

Despite these criticisms about length, scope, and methodology, *Breaking the Spell*

is a book that documentary, mass communications, and social movement scholars will find useful for research and teaching. It crafts a throughline across a variety of oppositional media groups often discussed as separate entities across a sprawling half-century period of political struggles in the United States and Canada. The book shows the connections across these groups as they deploy anti-hierarchical, decentralized, consensual, and direct action tactics that are, as Robé asserts “anarchist-inflected.”

Unlike many discussions of documentary that focus on feature-length films for art cinemas, *Breaking the Spell* dives into shorter works produced quickly on-the-ground during political actions, pieces designed not only to document actions but to mobilize activists. It concentrates on organizations themselves, tracing their operations and debates, an important contribution to the institutional histories of independent media in the United States that circumvents the auteurism and textual analysis lurking in the fields of documentary and screen studies. Disposing of the utopianism of much research on independent media, the interviews with producers, one of the significant strengths of this volume, reveals the continuing difficult debates about organizational strategies and struggles over race, class, gender, and identities inequalities. Ambitious in scope, urgent in tone, and partisan for oppositional anarchist direct action, *Breaking the Spell* offers a very necessary project of recovery, reconnection, and reclamation of independent oppositional media.

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Notes

1. With the exceptions of scholars like Alexandra Juhasz, Roger Hallas, Chuck Kleinhans, John Hess, Bill Nichols, Julia Lesage, Tom Waugh, and Faye Ginsburg, most of the work on community or alternative media organizations has been the domain of the more radical wing of communications studies in the work of John Downing, Kevin Howley, Leah Lievrouw, Manuel Castells, Chris Atton, and Clemencia Rodriguez. [[return to text](#)]
2. Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage raised these important issues about careerism amongst younger practitioners in radical media groups and about the relations between oppositional media groups and other kinds of political organizing that takes more time than simply documenting a demonstration or an action.
3. Paper Tiger Television, started in 1981 in New York City, is a live public access show that uses handmade production style to critique commercial media. Deep Dish, started in 1986, is a hub linking low budget videomakers to public access television and satellite. It produced the Gulf Crisis project in 1990-1991 response to the first US-led war in Iraq, aggregating video works from across the US. ACT UP is the acronym for the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, formed in 1987 to fight for legislation and medical support for people with AIDS.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Banners proclaim as the Admiralty district was cleared: "We'll be back." "It's just the beginning." Photo by P H Yang and used in Chan's *Raise the Umbrellas*. [8]



Umbrella as symbol of inclusiveness

by [Daniel C. Tsang](#)

A conversation with documentarian Evans Chan on censorship and Hong Kong's democratic Umbrella Movement of 2014

Introduction

Evans Chan is a New York-based playwright and critic, and a leading independent filmmaker from Hong Kong. He has made narrative features and documentaries, including

- *Crossings* (1994),
- *Journey to Beijing* (1998),
- *The Map of Sex and Love* (2001),
- *Sorceress of the New Piano* (2004),
- *Datong: the Great Society* (2011), and
- *The Rose of the Name: Writing Hong Kong* (2014).

Time Out Hong Kong (March, 2012) named Chan's directorial debut, *To Liv(e)* (1991), one of the hundred greatest Hong Kong films. Chan's award-winning films have been shown at the Berlin, Rotterdam, London, Moscow, Vancouver, San Francisco and Taiwan Golden Horse film festivals, among others.

Raise the Umbrellas (2016) is an in-depth, almost two-hour documentary of the 2014 79-day uprising and street occupation in Hong Kong over the lack of democratic options for its residents[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) Rod Stoneman, former Chief Executive of the Irish Film Board, found *Umbrellas* "articulate, intelligent and moving." French critic Jean-Michel Frodon praised it as a "powerful film connecting the past and present [of Chinese democratic movements,] and the multigenerational phenomenon" of the Hong Kong occupation.

Umbrellas was released twenty years after the former British Crown Colony was turned over to China by Britain. The film starts off with a brief look at the colonization of Hong Kong in 1842 as a result of the Opium War. Only in the few years before the 1997 decolonization of Hong Kong did the British embark on expanding the electorate and make China promise to fully democratize the legislature and the Chief Executive office after 1997. But after China restricted electoral reform in 2014 by proposing to vet candidates for Chief Executive elections, massive protests erupted in the streets. Those protests and 79 days of occupying major thoroughfares became known as the Umbrella Movement, when demonstrators used umbrellas to protect themselves against tear gas, pepper



spray, and police batons.

Key figures mentioned in the interview are three in the pan-democracy camp:

- Benny Tai, a law professor at the University of Hong Kong, who conceived of the idea of Occupy Central, which mutated into the Umbrella Movement;
- Martin Lee, founding chairman of the Democratic Party and an internationally recognized advocate for democracy and human rights, often referred to as the "Father of Democracy" in Hong Kong; and
- Emily Lau, the first woman directly elected to the Legislative Council and the chairperson (2012-2016) of the Democratic Party.

On the opposing side is pro-Beijing, former legislator Jasper Tsang, who presided over the Legislative Council during Occupy.

In the interview, one of the topics Evans Chan discusses concerns the roles languages play in Hong Kong, where Cantonese remains the prevailing, indigenous language used by the populace at large. Chan, however interviewed these four key figures in English, rather than Cantonese, with Chinese traditional-character subtitling provided. He explains why.

Overall, the persistent use of Cantonese in Hong Kong, rather than Mandarin, is tied to a rising and enhanced sense of locally-based, Hong Kong identity, especially among the younger members of the populace. The latest poll (December, 2017), from the University of Hong Kong's Public Opinion Programme (HKUPOP), shows clearly that only 0.3% of Hong Kong's youth under 30 identify as "Chinese," with an additional 7% identifying as "Chinese in Hong Kong." Of all polled, only 30.7% identify as Chinese or Chinese in Hong Kong. An overwhelming 89.9%, however, of those under 30 identify as "Hong Konger" or "Hong Konger in China," with 67.6% of all polled identifying as such (<https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/english/popexpress/ethnic/>).

This interview is by Daniel C. Tsang, a current visiting Fulbright research scholar based at Chinese University of Hong Kong Library and an honorary research fellow at HKUPOP. This article began as an oral interview first conducted on 10 November 2017 in Central Plaza, Wanchai, Hong Kong for Tsang's Subversity Online podcast (<http://www.kuci.org/podcastfiles/600/Sv171120.mp3>). Parts of the podcast interview (e.g. Chan's take on the Hong Kong independence movement and on film archiving) have been dropped, and the transcript has been further edited for readability, while additional email exchanges with Chan have been seamlessly incorporated here.

Note also that the interviewer is not related to Jasper Tsang.

Daniel Tsang: So when did you know you were going to do the film [*Raise the Umbrellas*]? Also, being based in New York with trips back to Hong Kong, how did you handle the logistics in such an intercontinental collaborative effort?

Evans Chan: Yes, logistics are complex, and not just because of the physical distance between Hong Kong and New York. That's why it took two years to finish *Raise the Umbrellas*. The idea of making this film first occurred to me after the inception of Benny Tai's Occupy Central proposal in 2013. And I conducted my



The protestors as they are pepper sprayed and tear gassed by the police. Photos by P H Yang and used in Chan's *Raise the Umbrellas*. [8]



The Umbrella Movement along with student leaders Nathan Law (left), Joshua Wong (middle), and Alex Chow (right) have been nominated for the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize by twelve U.S. Congressmen.



A scene from *Rose of the Name*, a documentary about Hong Kong novelist Dung Kaicheung (middle).



Joshua Wong, student leader. PH Yang photo.



Evans Chan and Joshua Wong.



Benny Tai cited Martin Luther King's "Letter from

first interviews with student leaders Joshua Wong, Yvonne Leung and Vivian Yip in 2014, while shooting *The Rose of the Name*, my documentary about Dung Kai-cheung, Hong Kong's leading novelist of the moment. Wong *et al* were all aware that something was going to happen in Hong Kong. I asked Nate Chan, my assistant director for *Rose*, to track Occupy events with a view toward making such a documentary. That's why when the director's cut of *The Rose of the Name* was premiered in Hong Kong in November of 2014, it already featured the tear-gassing footage that triggered the Umbrella Movement.

I was in Hong Kong through the month of November, visiting the Occupy zones as often as I could and conducting the majority of the interviews you saw in the film. Back in the US, I was interviewing international scholars such as Arif Dirlik, Andrew Nathan, and Ho-fung Hung. One interview with Benny Tai took place at Washington Square in New York after his workshop at the NYU Law School. Naturally I was aware that having just one camera—my cameraman's or Nate's—at any given time could not capture effectively the Umbrella Movement with its considerable duration and 3-zone spread, so I searched additional footage by recruiting videographers who have filmed Occupy.

Nora Lam came in as my assistant director/collaborator when I was back in HK to film the political showdown over Beijing's "universal suffragist" proposal at the Legislative Council. As the student reporter of HKU's Campus TV in 2014, and having made her own Umbrella short, Nora Lam was a great asset. (She has since matured into an excellent documentarian in her own right.)

My other Occupy collaborators, Thomas Leung, Kylie Tung, and Fox Fung, have contributed important zone footage. It goes without saying that archival research was indispensable. Significant material came from institutions such as *SocREC*, *Apple Daily*, and *Delight Media*. An unexpectedly tough struggle involved rights-clearance for Anthony Wong's concert footage, and that clip of Common giving a shout out to Hong Kong at the 2015 Oscar ceremony. And I ended up seeking legal advice from a First Amendment lawyer in New York for ensuring fair use. Those battles are long and complex, maybe let's go into them some other time.

DT: The film's pretty long.

EC: A lot of other Umbrella films are long, even longer—*Yellowing* runs for two and a half hours, *Almost a Revolution* is three hours long. I'm fully aware of most people's attention span in this internet age; therefore, when I started editing *Raise the Umbrellas*, I decided that it should not go over two hours...Now it's just below two hours.

DT: Did you have to translate much of what you interviewed into English?

EC: No...It depends on what you mean by translating them... Of course, subtitles...

DT: The speeches.

EC: You know I interviewed Benny Tai, Martin Lee, Emily Lau, and Jasper Tsang in English...There have been some reaction to such a language decision among the Hong Kong audience. Of course, I don't want to make Hong Kong audience feel that this film is not made for them...

The fact is: I hope my interviewees and the Hong Kong audience won't mind me saying that. I actually feel that Benny and Martin and Emily speak better English than Cantonese... Anyway, they seemed to articulate themselves with more intellectual clarity when they spoke in English. We bilingual folks know that when one operates in more than one language, one draws upon different cultural

Birmingham Jail" as an inspiration for his Occupy/Civil Disobedience campaign. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Martin Lee, pioneering democracy advocate in Hong Kong. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Scene from *Datong: The Great Society*.

assumptions depending on the language. While it's important to "adapt one's language" for different people, there is a danger of simplifying too much when these activists/politicians speak Cantonese to the grassroots community. Besides, I think that the local media or journalists are not too interested in citing certain references that they assume the readers are not interested in, or are not familiar with. For example, I always feel that Benny Tai's reference to Martin Luther King's *Letters from Birmingham Jail* as an important source for his conceptualization of a Hong Kong civil disobedience movement might not register with primarily Cantonese-speaking constituents.

DT: Right, sure.

EC: And by not referencing it, you actually are not seeing Hong Kong as part of the international political community, or as an important cultural crossroads where new ideas, concepts and movements arose since the 19th century.

DT: Right.

EC: So I feel that by getting them, especially for Martin and Benny, to speak in English to explain their intellectual sources about their understanding of civil disobedience, to explain how these concepts play out in Hong Kong and how they conceive democratic movement in Hong Kong, are important for us to understand the significance and lineage of the Umbrella Movement. One may say the Cantonese/Chinese vocabulary still hasn't quite caught up with their discussions. Don't forget that terms like civil disobedience or non-violent struggles are still relatively new entries in Cantonese/Chinese political parlance. That's why I asked them to speak in English. What I can do is to use Chinese subtitles to elucidate those concepts. Meanwhile, please remember that the three people I just mentioned are typical of what I would describe as the "cream of the crop."

DT: From the colonial period.

EC: From the colonial era. They are "elites"...not exactly economic and social elites, but intellectual elites who ventured into politics. They are all people who have been shaped by the best that the colonial era has to offer. And that comes with certain understanding [of]...the central issues, the struggles, and the concept of democracy. Democracy—as a procedure and a norm practiced by some leading Western democracies—is not a homegrown concept. It did not come from the Chinese's own culture. It did not come from the local vernacular culture. By that I'm not implying that Chinese culture doesn't have its homegrown vision of political ideals. I've tried to address those issues in my films about Kang Youwei, notably in *Datong: The Great Society*.

DT: It didn't come from May 4th movement.

EC: It did not. Even the May 4th movement was influenced by certain international trends. So if getting these folks to speak in English can better elucidate the discussions, I'll go for that.

On the other hand, when I interview scholars like Arif Dirlik and Andrew Nathan you don't expect them to speak Cantonese... They can speak Mandarin. But is that the best medium for them to be interviewed? Finally, *Raise the Umbrellas* is a kind of bilingual documentary, though more in Cantonese than in English. Naturally, a number of interviewees express themselves better in Cantonese. For example, I don't always expect a young student Occupier to be speaking fluent English. That's where the language decision comes in concerning the interview.

DT: I had the same issue with that. I had to give a talk at the Hong Kong Reader, the cultural studies bookshop on the Sai Yeung Choi Street [in Kowloon], and they

asked me to speak in Cantonese. But I'm talking about social activism and using some social science terms... I grew up here but I went to university in the United States and so I just didn't know how to express that sufficiently well in Cantonese.

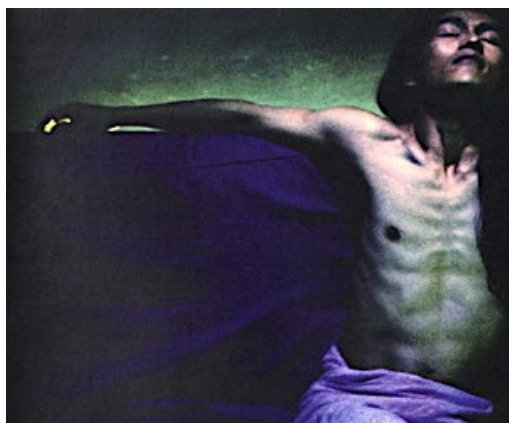
EC: You cannot do simultaneous translation on your feet like that, maybe given some time to think about it [you can].. And that's exactly the issue we are talking about. If you asked Benny, Martin, and Emily questions in Cantonese, and let them switch to their familiar [Cantonese] terrain for most people in Hong Kong, some ideas would be lost...

I mean certain Chinese terms also have a different linguistic development in various regions [Hong Kong, Taiwan, Chinese mainland] Probably because of social media and the Internet, every linguistic system is evolving very rapidly. And at times to make a film for the local audience as well as for the international audience is a tricky proposition.

Meanwhile, we saw a top-down movement/policy from Beijing to mainlandize [Hong Kong]... meaning to really treat Cantonese as less and less the dominant language in daily use...And yet with social media, it's always about a vernacular communication traffic. Because of its immediacy, its mode of instant exchanges, social media intensifies local/vernacular identities. That's why I think increasingly we seem to be witnessing the failure of so-called cultural "assimilation" among immigrants in most host countries in our contemporary world. The pressure, the mechanism or the incentive to downplay one's own native culture in order to belong to the host culture is mostly missing. Everybody can carry her/his native culture in her/his pocket in that tiny smart phone. Today Hong Kong's cultural conflicts with China arise partly from that intensification in both directions—I mean mainlandization as a public policy, and localization in private communication. The intensification of the local identity ultimately will have a profoundly public, political, or governance implication.[2]

DT: In your dramatic feature of 2001, *The Map of Sex and Love*, you took a close look at a personal gay relationship set on Lamma Island, Hong Kong. In the current documentary *Raise the Umbrellas*, you highlight the important role queer singers played in the Umbrella Movement. How have societal attitudes changed between then and now. Has the "personal" now become "political" in Hong Kong?

EC: To answer your question, maybe I should backtrack to talking about my



Larry (Victor Ma) in *The Map of Sex and Love*.



Anthony Wong, queer activist pop icon, is both an interviewee/advisor for the film. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Anthony Wong in Evans Chan's directorial debut, *To Liv(e)*.

directorial debut, *To Liv(e)* (1991), in which Anthony Wong, the queer Cantonpop icon and a leading activist during the Umbrella Movement, played the tortured lover in a relationship with an older woman, which is a trans-generational relationship that was socially ostracized and disapproved by the character's family. That plot detail wasn't an invention but based on a real story that I've heard. The song I used in *To Liv(e)*—*Forbidden Colors*—was one of Anthony's signature tunes. It alluded to the pressure on relationships outside the social norm, which of course include gay and lesbian relationships. *To Liv(e)* was the first film I collaborated with Anthony, early on in our careers.

By the time I made *The Map of Sex and Love* during the turn of the millennia, Anthony was my first choice to play Wei-ming the overseas-educated gay protagonist. However, Anthony had already lost interest in acting, so I cast Bernardo Chow for that role. There are three interrelated stories in *The Map*, two of which are about the two gay characters. The story of Larry, the gay dancer, stems from his vengeful reaction to sexual repression. The drama of Wei-ming, a diasporic Hong Kong artist, is a) political/philosophical—involving an under-known Holocaust connection in Asia; and b) familial: Obviously he has come out to his father, but did Pa get it?

I guess *The Map of Sex and Love* explores both the meaning of guilt and the politics of recognition. Whereas, *Umbrellas* seems to be a "straight"—pun intended—political film. After all, it's about the good old fight for democracy. I found it most interesting that after seeing *Umbrellas*, so many audience members outside of Hong Kong have asked me—why is there a LGBT strand in the film? It strongly suggests that LGBT politics are still much ghettoized, outside the purview of "the mainstream," as though such struggles automatically belong to a subset, an ancillary part of the project of democracy. But why? Aren't equal rights a central concern of democracy?

In fact, one of the most remarkable phenomena within the Umbrella Movement were the unapologetic voices from a lesbian (Denise Ho) and a gay man (Anthony Wong)—the loudest, but almost the lone voices from Hong Kong's entertainment industry. Together they turned an emerging singer-songwriter's (Ah Pan's) composition, *Raise the Umbrellas*, into the anthem of the Umbrella Movement. [3] They performed the song live at Occupy zones and created an ensemble recording posted online that has been heard by tens of thousands of people. Eventually that song was named the 2014 Favorite Song of The Year by Commercial Radio. It's not surprising that I essentially named the film after that song. For taking a stand, both Ho and Wong have been professionally penalized by the Beijing government. I think what distinguished their action from the old gay politics paradigm has to do with them being there, as openly gay citizens, to fight for democracy itself, not just addressing anti-discrimination or equal rights.

As a longtime New York resident, I had witnessed the unfolding of the same-sex marriage struggles in the US. You know for a while, the African American community resented the LGBTQ community using the civil rights movement as a model for their struggles. Apparently, one disfavored group doesn't necessarily sympathize with the plight of other disfavored groups. But there was no such enmity in Hong Kong between the LGBT activists and the student protest leaders, who actually showed up at the Pride parade—which took place during Occupy—to deliver a statement of support. Strikingly, Hong Kong democratic activists' coalition-building has turned the idea of "umbrella" into the literal symbol of inclusiveness.



Denise Ho, singer and activist. LGBT and student protest unity, with the umbrella as a symbol of inclusiveness. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.

Let's go back to my collaborations with Anthony Wong to gauge the progress of LGBT rights in Hong Kong. Anthony's *Forbidden Colors*, which alludes to taboo sex, was released in 1988, something like a quarter century before Anthony outed himself publicly at his own concert in 2012. And *Raise the Umbrellas* is the first film since *To Liv(e)* when I had a chance to work with him again. But look! He was playing himself—a cutting-edge performer, music-maker and democracy advocate who happens to be gay. I was quite moved by this actor/director "reunion" after two decades.

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| <p>Denise Ho, first out lesbian singer in the Chinese speaking world.</p> | <p>Anthony Wong—many years to sing "Forbidden Colors" as a gay man.</p> |

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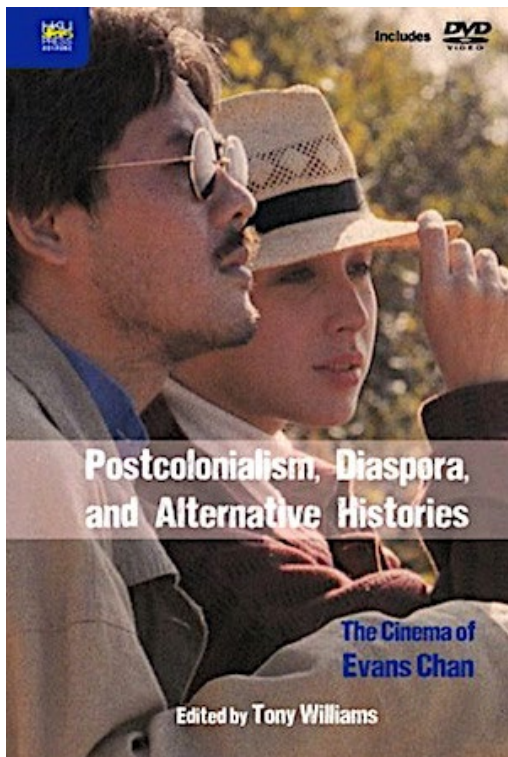
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Mass confrontation between protesters and police. Photo by P H Yang and used in Chan's *Raise the Umbrellas*. [8]



Cover of *Postcolonialism, Diaspora, and Alternative Histories—The Cinema of Evans Chan*.

DT: I am struck by the many visual depictions in the film, many of which I saw for the first time. Was that a deliberative effort to include lots of visuals, although you do have talking heads as well?

EC: Cinema is always about the interaction between image, sound and language. Inevitably, documentaries tend to be dominated by language, i.e. exposition, which often translates as talking heads. For me transcending the monotony of static talking heads is often one of my key creative challenges as a "documentarian," or, as I like to view myself, as a "filmic narrative artist." But my subject—the Umbrella Movement—is a visually striking event, albeit probably more by accident than by design. The 79-day Occupy, which transformed the cityscape, had become an unprecedented occasion to unleash Hong Kongers' creative energy, resulting in countless items of protest arts by citizen artists. Also, dancers, musicians converged at Occupy zone to celebrate the demand for democracy. It's not too hard to unearth interesting visuals for the film.

DT: Are you surprised that you couldn't present the film at Asia Society [Hong Kong Center on November 1, 2016]?

EC: Yes. I was...

DT: Because they've shown it before?

EC: They showed the short, work-in-progress 26-minute version of *Umbrellas*, along with *To Liv(e)*, my first film—a full-length dramatic feature. That program took place in... 2015. [It was on 10 December 2015]. The occasion was to mark the Hong Kong University Press's publication of a critical anthology about my work: *Postcolonialism, Diaspora, and Alternative Histories: The Cinema of Evans Chan*. For that occasion, the panelists included Gina Marchetti, from HKU's Comp Lit department; Staci Ford, from HKU's American Studies and History departments, and Michael Ingham, Professor of English at Lingnan U. Clearly, the political component of my work was not so upfront that evening. Of course, the event's main offering was *To Liv(e)*, which is about post-Tiananmen, post-June 4th Hong Kong. Each era has its own taboo. That was a huge taboo in China and remains so, but less so in Hong Kong these days and not at Asia Society that night... After all Hong Kong has been organizing the annual June 4th candlelight vigil from 1990 till today.

DT: So there was an early version of *Umbrellas*?

EC: Yes, there was a short... 26-minute version that had been shown at a couple of places, some universities—NYU, King's College in London...

DT: After the Asia Society incident, one local university (Hong Kong University of Science Technology) banned a post-screening panel discussion, but allowed you to show the film there [on 20 November 2017]. Do you envision more censorship attempts?

EC: The more fundamental censorship problem in Hong Kong lies in the fact that it seems no longer possible for politically sensitive films to be released in commercial cinemas after the roaring success (or debacle) of *Ten Years*. Though there are other Umbrella films, mine is the one that ran into censorship

problems repeatedly. The two censorship incidents, taking place a year apart, are both alarming and concerning. Asia Society canceled the film's Hong Kong premiere after claiming that the "imbalance" of the post-screening discussion panel had breached its "non-partisan" profile. But they had banned not only the panel discussion, but also the screening itself.[4] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Whereas HKUST banned the panel for "bringing politics" into its campus, but allowed my film to be screened, which I accepted because reaching out to university students remains one of my goals.

I'd say that Asia Society actually was adopting a *partisan* position by cancelling the panel and screening, while HKUST has made a *political decision* in banning the panel. From an institutional perspective, they can always organize another event to counteract this Umbrella program. As for balance, I can't imagine them inviting protesters or opposition scholars to, say, a "one-belt-one-road" event. It is regrettable that Asia Society's "imbalance" assertion has at times been reported out of context. What happened was—Yes, I had Martin Lee, Benny Tai, and Nathan Law, Joshua Wong's colleague and newly elected legislator, agreeing to be on the panel. Yet I had also invited the pro-Beijing Jasper Tsang to be a panelist, but he declined. That gave an opening to the "imbalance" charge. However, Tsang was a key interviewee in my film.



Pro-Beijing legislator Jasper Tsang. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.

DT: How then do you respond to criticism that the film is “one-sided,” focusing on the protesters rather than the pro-Beijing side?

As I've mentioned, the "imbalance" charge has been falsely tagged from the panel onto my film. But of course, a few critics and some PRC students I encountered in the United States also latched onto that. I must say It is most ironic that among all the Umbrella documentaries that I'm aware of, mine is the only one that has offered space to include anti-Occupy voices throughout. For example, *Almost a Revolution* and *Yellowing*, as well as *Teenager versus Superpower*, the Netflix-acquired documentary about Joshua Wong, barely include pro-Beijing statements. Critics of my film should be aware that, first off, I'm not making a documentary about anti-Occupy, but about the occupation. Maybe they should ask themselves—why haven't there been filmmakers who feel passionate enough about the anti- Occupy cause to make films about it?

In my film, other than having Jasper Tsang as a key representative of the pro-Beijing camp, I've cited various statements by C.Y. Leung (Hong Kong's Chief Executive at the time), sound bites from other pro-government legislators such as Priscilla Mei-fun Leung, Starry Wai-king Lee. At least three student occupiers talked about their parents' objection (wrecking the economy and creating social chaos). I have a parent confronting some pan-democratic legislators for leading her children astray (by participating in Occupy), and endangering their future. I've filmed anti-Occupy protesters denouncing students, charging them of "getting paid." I've included an animation attacking Occupy for blocking traffic and causing inconvenience.

Pro-Beijing positions have been included, such as Jasper Tsang's claim that Beijing's "universalist suffragist" proposal was not "North Korean-style" election because Hongkongers have "more than one candidate to choose from." (China's decision was to allow no more than three candidates screened by Beijing to run for Chief Executive elections.) Or C.Y. Leung attacking Occupy as "illegal" or as an event stirred up by "foreign influence." Probably my film doesn't sit well with those critics because I have included experts' and Occupiers' rebuttals. Beijing's electoral package was "false democracy," asserted Martin Lee. Prof. Andrew



Sinologist Andrew Nathan of Columbia University. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Emily Lau, the first woman directly elected to the Legislative Council and the chairperson of the Democratic Party during Occupy. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Jimmy Lai, publisher of *Apple Daily News*, which provides some archival footage. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.



Nathan debunked Beijing's assertion that the National Endowment for Democracy, of which he was a board member, orchestrated the Umbrella Movement. Benny Tai presented the concept of civil disobedience as a challenge to the very notion of legality or illegality by citing Martin Luther King.

My critics also ignored my efforts in presenting the starkly polarized social reality, i.e. the huge reservoir of discontent simmering in Hong Kong, as a backdrop to Occupy. Essentially, their points of view have been represented. Jasper Tsang has quite a bit of screen time. The reason those people singled out my film for criticism—and imposed censorship practices on it repeatedly—could be because the more fair-minded my approach is, the more threatening to their needs for not having to deal with a democratic uprising. Understandably a sizable segment of the Hong Kong population doesn't want protesters to rock the boat, meaning endangering their relative economic well-being—I do have an Occupier responding to that in the film though. All that I can say is the Hong Kong Occupy/Umbrella Movement erupted in such a massive way—easily one million people participating in various degrees—indicated that a significant portion of the citizenry felt enough is enough.

In fact, I think it's due to the film's anti-Occupy material that more than one Hong Kong reporter has asked me—what exactly my position was vis-a-vis Occupy, as though having made such a film, which was being censored and banned, is not in itself a statement. My philosophy in making films with a historical subject, be it about the late Qing reformer Kang Youwei or the Umbrella Movement—which has by the way been folded into history already—has always been: I'm trying to understand why and how something happened, and not why something shouldn't have happened. The last thing I want to do is to wish away, counter-intuitively, some factual and historical incidents.

DT: Marxist historian Arif Dirlik appears in your film to talk about resistance movements like Occupy around the globe. After his death in December 2017 you have indicated you will dedicate future community screenings to him. Why is he an important figure to include in your documentary?

EC: Arif Dirlik was a friend and mentor of mine for some twenty years. He first approached me when he was editing the anthology, "China and Postmodernism." Professor Kwai-cheung Lo at Hong Kong Baptist University kindly mentioned me to him as someone from Hong Kong who both writes and makes films. At Arif's suggestion, I contributed the paper "Postmodernism and Hong Kong Cinema" to his book. A few years later, he invited me to a conference, prompting me to write the essay, "Zhang Yimou's 'Hero' and the Temptation of Fascism," which quickly became controversial and much cited later on. Arif was a rigorous scholar who was as disenchanted and critical of U.S. hegemony as about post-Mao China's absorption into the neo-liberal order of global capitalism. As a Turkish intellectual in exile and an expert on the origin and development of Chinese Marxism, he was among the shrewdest observers of global modernity in general and Chinese modernity in particular. His areas of expertise overlapped with my interests and concerns, so I ended up interviewing him in three of my films—my two part Kang Youwei docu-drama, *Datong: The Great Society* and *Two or Three Things about Kang Youwei*, as well as *Raise the Umbrellas*. He was also an advisor for these projects.

Arif Dirlik, the late historian of Chinese Marxism, an interviewee/advisor for the film. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.



90 year old Uncle Wong at the Rally on July 15. Photo by P H Yang and used in Chan's *Raise the Umbrellas*. [8]



Uncle Wong says he is unrepentant. Photo by P H Yang and used in Chan's *Raise the Umbrellas*. [8]



Occupier Vivian Yip, a student leader. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.

It's a pity that I can include only some of his observations in this film *Umbrellas*. He had quite a bit to say about the comparative colonial experiences between Taiwan and Hong Kong, and his analysis of the evolution of Chinese state capitalism is very detailed and insightful. But I'm afraid a lot of these issues can be too technical and recondite for viewers without a strong academic background. What was left of his interview was mainly his situating of the Umbrella Movement within the global Occupy movements. In such a context, one can see Occupy in Hong Kong, as elsewhere, is a democratic struggle that encompasses both economic and political aspects of society. That's how we should understand one student occupier's question toward the end of my film: "Why are they creating a society that excludes the young?"

Arif remarked that democratic struggle is often a way of overcoming economic and social injustice caused by a corrupt system. Benny Tai echoed that view. I didn't belabor the point by including what Tai has mentioned in one of his several interviews with me—that Occupy Central did at one time consider adding the issue of social inequality onto its platform, but ended up deciding to use universal suffrage as the defining tool to create a more responsive government. To my critics, I'd say that their emphasis on what kind of "views" have been included smacks of escapism—it's as though people either want to obfuscate or don't want to face up to the social and political dynamic that created the conditions for social unrest. It's as though whether a momentous social event materializes or not is just a matter of "persuasive" arguments. Does anybody really believe that it was entirely due to Benny Tai or Joshua Wong's personal charisma or powerful rhetoric that tens of thousands of people would take to the street to confront tear-gassing and the police?

I would dedicate screenings of this film to memories of Arif as long as I could. However, the film itself has already been dedicated to Elsie Tu, a pioneer of Hong Kong democracy from the colonial era, whom I respected tremendously. Elsie had performed a lifetime service for the former colony, her roots in Hong Kong of course went much deeper than Arif's. But Arif was truly a friend of the Hong Kong people. After his passing, I came across an interview with Arif conducted by Lenny Kwok, Hong Kong's pioneering political rocker from the band Black Bird, in 2004. [5] In this interview, Arif expressed his wishes that "a place-based identity, a place-based politics" would eventually happen in Hong Kong. Obviously, his wishes had been more than fulfilled by the furious rise of localization politics bred by the Umbrella Movement. One of the last things Arif did was to give me a brief statement in support of *Raise the Umbrellas* after it was banned by Asia Society. However, I didn't really have a chance or a platform to post it. Maybe now is the time:

"The Hong Kong chapter of Asia Society cancelled Evans Chan's documentary film, *Raise the Umbrellas*, on the grounds that the panelists selected to discuss the film consisted only of those with pro-democracy views. This does not explain why the showing of the film itself should have been cancelled (I may note, for the record, that pro-Beijing politician Jasper Tsang Yuk-sing, who appeared in Chan's film, turned down an invitation to participate in the panel discussion). It is revealing, and deeply disturbing, that administrators of Asia Society should indeed believe that discussion of democracy and free speech must be biased if it does not include the voices of those who would suppress them." [6]

And in his last e-mail to me on September 11, 2017, Arif was fully aware of his imminent demise and encouraged me to "keep it up and don't let them silence you." He may have made my role sound more heroic than it actually is.



During the Hong Kong Occupy, someone hung a "I want real elections" banner on the Lion Rock. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.



An underaged student Occupier in the Mongkok zone. Screenshot from *Raise the Umbrellas*.

Meanwhile, it saddens me to think about this interview appearing in this website, when the founder of *Jump Cut*, Chuck Kleinhans, a dear professor and mentor of mine at Northwestern University, also passed away recently. Chuck's support and commitment to creating a platform for the under-represented, non-mainstream media and cinema had been long-standing and exemplary. After hearing the political troubles that my *Umbrella* film ran into, he expressed an interest in carrying an interview in "the upcoming issue." Unfortunately, he never had a chance to finalize this issue. Now it's left to Julia Lesage, *Jump Cut*'s co-founder/editor and Chuck's lifetime partner, to carry on this task, and hopefully beyond this issue. Film scholar and media students need *Jump Cut*. All that I can say is had there been more people like Arif and Chuck, this world would have been a much, much better place.

In memory of their intellectual courage, moral probity and mentoring, I'll do my best to bear witness to history through my tool and, if I may, art, as the battle between remembrance and forgetting, and particularly between remembrance and the active erasure of history is heating up at this cultural moment in so many corners of the globe.

Additional note by the interviewer DT:

It is tragic yet ironic that two transplants to Eugene, Oregon, Arif Dirlik and Chuck Kleinhans, passed away in December within weeks of each other. In fact, Chuck, with his loving partner Julia, had both commissioned this interview for *Jump Cut* a few weeks earlier. Ironically, the last e-mail from Chuck to me was his reaction to my tribute [7] to Arif, who was also a good comrade and fellow traveler who died on 1 December 2017.

Chuck e-mailed me 13 December 2017, a day before he passed away: "Dan, thanks for this interesting piece. I had seen Arif talk once at a conference—I think it was one David Li organized at U Oregon back in the 90s or so. I also first met Evans Chan there. I wasn't aware of a permanent or recurring connection to [Hong Kong], so all of the rest is news to me...Best, Chuck."

I regret I had never spoken in person with Chuck although I am sure I must have seen him at one conference or another since the 1970s, when I first personally subscribed to *Jump Cut*. I had been the research librarian at Temple University from 1978-1980, focusing on acquiring alternative press, including *Jump Cut*, and since 1986 a film studies bibliographer at various times at UC Irvine. Hence I feel forever indebted to Chuck for his raising early awareness of queer and Third World cinemas in his writings in *Jump Cut* especially. This interview in this issue hopefully serves as a tribute to him.

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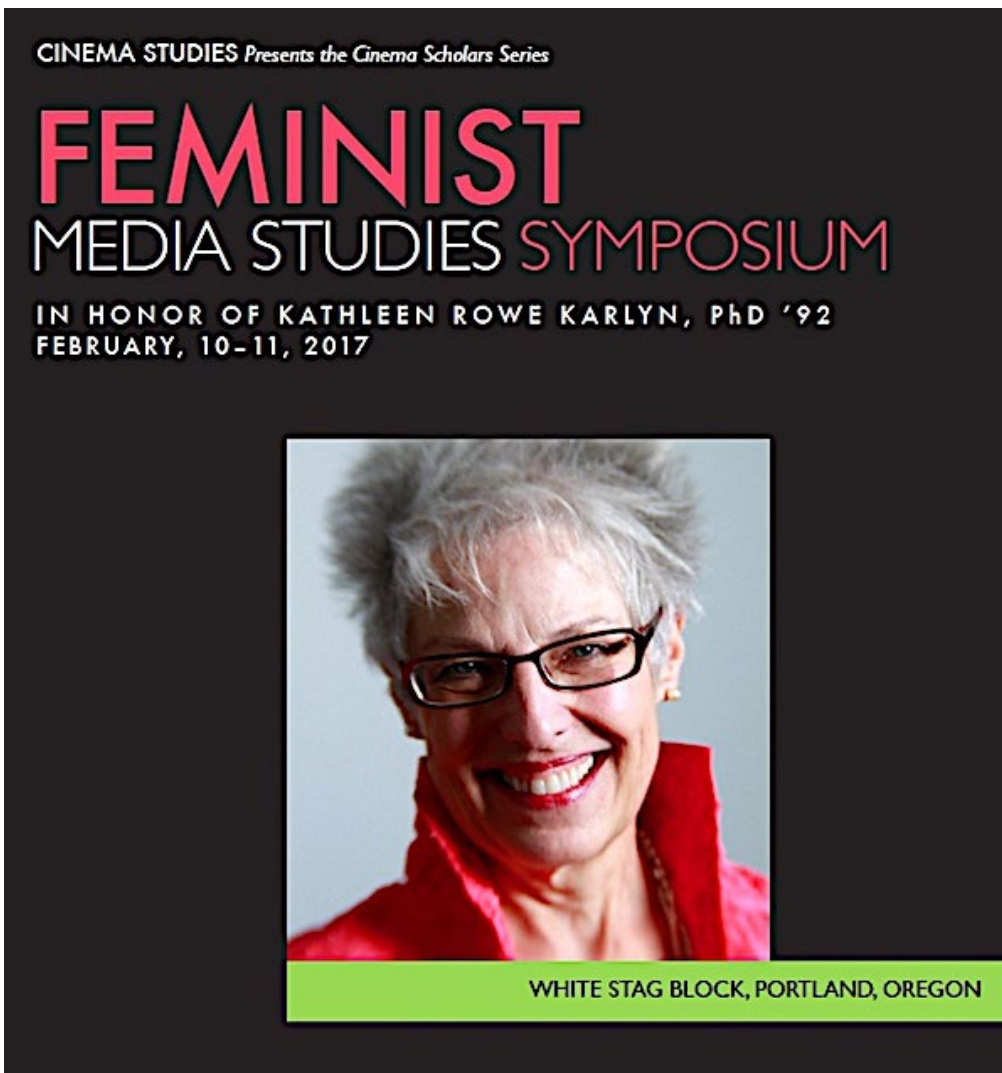
Notes

1. An English voice-over and updated version of *Raise the Umbrellas* is completed in 2018. Meanwhile, scheduled screenings include NYU on February 21, Pomona College on February 28, UCLA on March 1, SOAS University of London on March 16, UC-Santa Barbara on May 30, and the Berlin Literature Festival on September 8. [[return to text](#)]
2. See Sebastian Veg, "Legalistic and Utopian: Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement." *New Left Review* 92, March-April 2015, pp. 55-73.
3. <http://www.interlude.hk/front/music-fuelled-occupy-hong-kong/>
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/11/world/asia/hong-kong-umbrella-revolution-film.html> [[return to page 2](#)]
5. [Kwok], Lenny. "WTO Protests, Place-based Democracy, Tiananmen & 7-Chinas: The Arif Dirlik Interview," *Blackbird: Body of Work 1984-2004*. Hong Kong: Ming Pao Weekly, 2007. See also, Arif Dirlik's August/September 2016 paper ([http://icaps.nsysu.edu.tw/ezfiles/122/1122/img/2375/CCPS2\(2\)-Dirlik.pdf](http://icaps.nsysu.edu.tw/ezfiles/122/1122/img/2375/CCPS2(2)-Dirlik.pdf))
6. Arif Dirlik's e-mail to Evans Chan, July 10, 2017
7. <http://subversities.blogspot.hk/2017/12/remembering-historian-arif-dirlik.html>
8. Umbrella Movement images by P H Yang, as used by Evans Chan in the movie *Raise the Umbrellas*. Photos courtesy of P H Yang Photography, phyang.org and <http://phyang.org/>. [[return to page 1](#). [return to page 2](#)]



Feminist media studies symposium: an introduction

by Julia Lesage



On February 10-11, 2017, a gathering of scholars and students celebrated the work of Kathleen Karlyn, professor of film and television studies at the University of Oregon, and in particular her groundbreaking concept of the Unruly Woman as a literary trope that figures large in film and television comedy. In this issue of *Jump Cut*, we are publishing a number of the papers given at this event.

Senior scholar Linda Mizejewski gave an overview of the shift from feminist film

studies to feminist media studies, which has placed an equal emphasis on television and figures in popular culture as on film, and she places Karlyn as a key figure in this transition. Russell Meeuf uses the example of Melissa McCarthy to examine the use of corpulent femininity in comedy today, and taking up another trope, Rachel Weir finds examples of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in cinema and also films that challenge that myth. Looking back in film history, Claire Graman traces feminine unruliness back to the screwball comedy and even silent film.

As Karlyn defines this trope of feminine unruliness, it has the following traits:

- “The unruly woman refuses to submit or defer to men.
- Her body is excessive and often fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.
- Her speech is excessive in quantity, content or tone.
- She makes jokes about men, and uses laughter to unite women.
- Often androgynous, she draws attention to social construction of gender.”

Perhaps one of Karlyn’s most direct heirs in developing insights about today’s unruly women, and also a participant at the symposium, is Anne Helen Petersen. Petersen, in her 2017 book, *The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman* (Penguin Random House), writes about the “too ...” — the excess that causes some female cultural icons be judged negatively: she’s too strong, too fat, too gross, too slutty, too old, too pregnant, too shrill, too queer, too loud, or too naked.

And finally, Karlyn herself has written a new essay for this grouping of essays, a discussion of Wonder Woman, the figure and the film, and Hillary Clinton. As Karlyn points out, social perceptions of female unruliness focus on a cluster of attributes that can both celebrate and demonize female power. In this case, both the success of the *Wonder Woman* film and Hilary Clinton’s loss at the polls came as a surprise, and Karlyn traces out relations between both of these cultural figures and her responses to both.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Kathleen Rowe Karlyn and feminist genres of laughter

by [Linda Mizejewski](#)

Several years ago, Victoria Sturtevant and I began to plan an anthology of essays that would encompass the history of U.S. women comedians from the silent screen through cable television. Thinking about these outrageous bawds and wits, as well as the uncontrollable laughter they continue to incite, we kept coming back to a point made by Kathleen Rowe in her groundbreaking 1995 book *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. The power of funny women, says Rowe, is crystalized in the specific threat of “the female mouth and its dangerous emanations—laughter and speech” (43). [[open notes and works cited in new window](#)]

Focusing on this insight, Sturtevant and I chose the trope of hysteria to link a history of dangerous female emanations, a history of feminism, and the tradition of female unruliness so eloquently laid out by Rowe. Our anthology, *Hysterical! Women and American Comedy* (2017), gathers essays from two generations of scholars who have likewise been inspired by Rowe’s theorization of loud-mouthed sitcom and rom com heroines and who have extended her work to include stand-up comedians, talk-show hosts, and contemporary showrunners.

In one sense, this is the happy, never-ending story of how all good scholarship keeps engendering fresh insights and queries. But the larger story here is about the very inclusion of these topics as objects of study in feminist theory. It’s not in the purview of this short essay to map out the development of feminist media studies in response to and as distinct from feminist film theory, nor the overlapping relations between the two bodies of scholarship. Instead, I hope to highlight the influence of Kathleen Rowe in these relations because *The Unruly Woman* exemplifies feminist theory’s richness and complexity. More than half the book is about cinema, but it’s grounded in cultural theory rather than in the psychoanalytic feminist film theory that was prevalent in the early 1990s. And by focusing on a character figuration rather than a medium of production, it established an early example of transmedia cultural scholarship, tapping television’s *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997) and Miss Piggy of the Muppets as primary illustrations of female unruliness.





Comic actress Marie Dressler, MGM's biggest box office draw in the early 1930s



Wanda Sykes and the tradition of anti-racist comedy

For cinema studies in particular, *The Unruly Woman* opened a vibrant line of inquiry. Rigorously theorized, the critical model of the Unruly Woman enabled feminist film theory to include the madcap heroines and fast-talking con women that earlier feminist scholarship had eschewed. In short, Kathleen Rowe is a significant plot point in the ongoing narrative of feminist theory on comedy. This larger story is also about feminist scholarship's more inclusive turn to bodies and stars that had been left out of the picture, and about a turn from melodrama to comedy, the better to include our stories of hysterical laughter as well as tears.

Sturtevant and I were able to come to our anthology project as the benefactors of this history. In 2009, she had published *A Great Big Girl Like Me: The Films of Marie Dressler*, a book that brought critical attention to a comic actress who in the early 1930s was MGM's biggest box office draw. Dressler was a substantial woman—five foot seven, two hundred pounds—who became a star in her 60s. Sturtevant found in Dressler a perfect match for the qualities Rowe had laid out in her theoretical model of the Unruly Woman. Sturtevant writes in her introduction that

“Dressler’s comedy is all about the body, and her body is excessive—too old, too large, and too active for feminine propriety . . . transgressing the boundaries of feminine containment” (34).

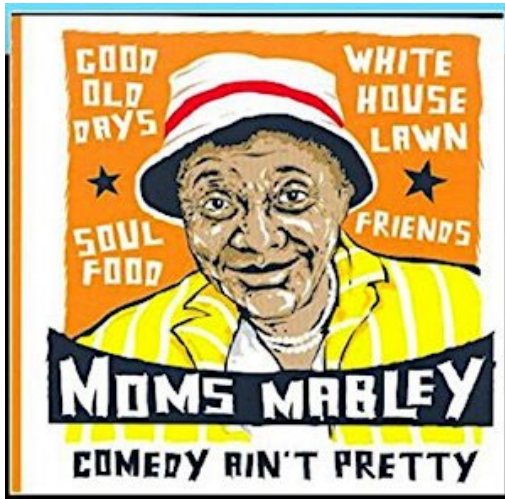
She was able to argue for the meaning and *importance* of that body by citing Rowe’s key insight about the Unruly Woman: her loudness and dominance disrupt the gendered social order itself and signify female subjectivity. Rowe argues,

“Ultimately, the unruly woman can be seen as prototype of woman as subject, transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire” (31).

In my own work, this claim for comic unruliness as female subjectivity made it possible to explore the feminist implications of contemporary women’s comedy and to extend Rowe’s insights to stand-up comedy and reality television series. In *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (2014), my starting point is comedy’s skewed relation to femininity; my argument is that prettiness, the gold standard of femininity, remains a primary target of feminist comedy, as seen in Tina Fey’s bumbling Liz Lemon character or in Kathy Griffin’s defiant embrace of the D List. And because prettiness is perceived as white femininity in our culture, the racial and racist meanings of “pretty” can be lampooned by wicked satire, as seen by the likes of Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho. In our *Hysterical* anthology, Sykes and Cho are further analyzed by Bambi Haggins and Rebecca Krefting, respectively, who emphasize the centrality of anti-racist politics in the comedy of these women. Making the point that politically-charged Black female comedy has a longer history, Haggins draws out the connection between Sykes and stand-up comic Moms Mabley (1894-1975), whose sly granny persona channeled her formidable social critique.

Moms Mabley and Marie Dressler are good examples of bodies, stardoms, and topics that were excluded from the early days of feminist scholarship on film and television. Mabley had a long career on the Black venues of the Chitlin’ Circuit and then on the stage of Harlem’s Apollo Theater. She went mainstream with a number of successful comedy albums in the 1960s followed by appearances on variety shows such as *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (CBS 1967-1970). Feminist television scholarship, to its great credit, included women’s comedy before feminist film studies would do so. Patricia Mellencamp’s work on Lucille Ball and Gracie Allen, for instance, was a harbinger of later attention to the sit com as a genre of special interest for women.[1] But there was no interest in stand-up comics such as Mabley nor interest in the Black entertainment venues in which Mabley had thrived for decades. Nor was there curiosity in feminist film

theory about what, who, and how Black audiences might be watching. We had, in fact, no way of describing Mabley's persona—the outspoken crone, androgynous, disorderly, inappropriate—in positive ways, though she would fit, exactly, the qualities Rowe later associated with the Unruly Woman.



Moms Mabley's unruly comedy

As for the neglect of mainstream star and Academy-Award winner Dressler, it's true that Dressler died in 1934, just as romantic comedy introduced a traditionally-feminine comic heroine. *It Happened One Night* (1934) became the template for the genre that celebrates an unruly-but-beautiful woman who eventually finds her place in the heterosexual couple. In the wake of this hugely popular and more conservative genre, the funny-looking female bodies that had populated silent screen comedies were marginalized into sidekicks, secretaries, and housekeepers. That is, given that feminist film theory focused on post-1930 Hollywood cinema, it's possible to argue that Dressler and other funny-looking actresses fell outside the parameters of that study.



But it's also true that we were not much interested in bodies that were marginalized. Like classic Hollywood cinema itself, our attention was riveted on glamorous stars who were the object of the male gaze—and a large percentage of Hollywood films engaged with those white bodies and with the dynamics of voyeurism. The brilliant poststructuralist work begun by Laura Mulvey had been carried on in the 1980s by influential feminists such as Mary Ann Doane, Constance Penley, Judith Mayne, Ann Kaplan, Linda Williams, Tania Modleski and others. Our theories were predominantly psychoanalytic, and in our favorite films for analysis, glamour queens Barbara Stanwyck, Marlene Dietrich, and Joan Crawford played melodramatic heroines—*Stella Dallas* (1937), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *Mildred Pierce* (1945).



Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*



Stella Dallas outside her daughter's wedding

Our scholarship had in fact become melodramatic, with Mary Ann Doane declaring that for women spectators, the best we could hope for was not desire but the desire to desire—leaving us with the shivering Stella Dallas watching her daughter's wedding from the sidewalk or with the tempestuous Pearl, shot to death in the desert in *Duel in the Sun* (1946).[2] Let me be clear: these studies in melodrama were crucial in bringing female subjectivity to the forefront in psychoanalytic film theory. The elegant analyses of the great 1930s and 1940s women's films stunningly demonstrated that powerful stars had transcended their doomed fate in the scripts and that a major thrust of classic Hollywood cinema had taken women's stories seriously—or at least, some women's stories.



Pearl (Jennifer Jones) dying with her lover (Gregory Peck) at the end of *Duel in the Sun* (1946)

At the same time, as bell hooks scorchingly pointed out in her 1992 manifesto, “The Oppositional Gaze,” feminist film theory to that point had seriously neglected consideration of race, “writing only about images of white women . . . under the totalizing category ‘woman,’” and writing about spectatorship with no regard to racial difference (124). Her critique was part of a much wider protest against the whiteness of much feminist theory in the early 90s, but the specifics of her criticism remain sharp reminders of the assumptions behind the basic concepts of our original enterprise: the male gaze, female spectacle, narrative agency, woman as image. Which women? What audiences? Whose images?

By now, this critique and the limitations of psychoanalytic feminist film theory are widely known, but my point here is that the focus of this theory on white femininity not only neglected to interrogate its own category—the requisite whiteness of femininity—but also omitted bodies that fell outside both terms—the non-white, the non-feminine. Black women were automatically excluded from glamour and the realm of the feminine. Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers played mammies and maids; Fredi Washington, who played the lovely mixed-race daughter in the 1934 *Imitation of Life*, abandoned Hollywood when it became clear there were no decent roles for her.



Louise Beavers in Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934)



Hattie McDaniel, who won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress as Mammy in Fleming's *Gone With the Wind* (1939)



Fredi Washington, who left Hollywood and became a Civil Rights activist



Hermione Gingold



Jane Withers



Mary Wickes

For less-than-glamorous white women, at least minor comic roles were available, but it took decades for feminist scholars to become curious about the subversive potential of third-wheel roles played by Jane Withers, Mary Wickes, Charlotte Greenwood, and Hermione Gingold. Female *comic* spectacle was less compelling as a topic than female sexual spectacle; the sheer disruptiveness of the former should have been a clue about its value.

Even about romantic comedies in which women played central roles, virtually nothing was written by feminist film scholars in those days because we saw, in these stories, endings that looked too pat, too heterosexual, too ideologically smug. We preferred our endings in blood, suicide, tears, abandonment, murder, or stoic endurance. We loved the ways melodrama so piercingly represented female subjectivity under patriarchy—foregrounding the confinements of domesticity, contradictions of heterosexuality, and punishment of female excess and desire. If we thought of women’s comedy at all, it was through Mae West, whom we viewed with suspicion because she was the phallic woman, and whose excessiveness was explained through the mechanisms of fetishization.[3] West, like Dressler, was an exceptional body, but unlike Dressler, West’s body fit the feminist psychoanalytic theories illustrating the patriarchal tyranny of Hollywood cinema.

Dressler’s films included a great deal of melodrama, but their generous comic spirit embraced and celebrated the grotesque, maternal body. And this comic embrace of the maternal was outside the periphery of feminist critique of Hollywood film. That critique was far more adept at pinpointing comedy that shunned or punished such maternal bodies, as Lucy Fischer astutely illustrated in her essay, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child: Comedy and Matricide.” Tellingly, that essay was the sole contribution from a woman theorist in the 1991 anthology *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, which discussed no women comedians at all, not even Mae West.[4] As that anthology demonstrated, scholarship on male comic auteurs had long come into its own, claiming the cinematic comic canon as a masculinist enterprise, from Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton through Woody Allen, with Mae West included as the interesting exception.

Rowe’s first essay on women and comedy did not rebuke the feminist focus on melodrama but rather illuminated how both modes of storytelling share the same stakes. The breakthrough insight of this 1995 essay, “Comedy, Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genres of Laughter,” is that both stories showcase an outrageous heroine. The desperate diva, grande dame, femme fatale, and soap opera vixen are all mirror images of the over-the-top heroine of romantic comedy.



Mae West



Cher at the 1988 Academy Awards ceremony where she won Best Actress for *Moonstruck*

Rowe calls her “the excessive woman.” In this essay, Rowe takes on Stella Dallas herself and puts her up against Cher in *Moonstruck* (1987)—Cher, who had been deconstructing herself since the 1970s and who had shown up for her Academy Award in a risqué dress from a drag-queen runway catalog. Cher had been celebrated by gay men long before feminists realized the comic and subversive implications of her performances of femininity.[5] Remember that in winning the Academy Award for *Moonstruck*, Cher had beat out Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), the movie that told us feminism and female desire led to murder and boiled bunnies.

In her essay, Rowe connects Cher’s character in *Moonstruck* with the sad, locked-out Stella Dallas, pointing out that what they have in common is excess—desiring too much, breaking the rules, taking on male prerogatives. Both melodrama and romantic comedy, she writes, “narrate the stories of ‘excessive’ women who assert their own desire and whose stories are emplotted in narratives which depend on the ideology of heterosexual romance” (50). The difference, Rowe writes, is that in melodrama the excessive woman is punished for desiring too much, but in romantic comedy, she gets what she wants. It’s a temporary victory, of course, and once she’s in the patriarchal family and tethered into a heterosexual bond, complications ensue. But instead of focusing on the perils of heterosexuality as the *only* story of romantic comedy, Rowe argues for the pleasures of watching the romantic heroine’s rebellion—her spunk and quirkiness, her over-the-top behavior, and most of all her desire. “Romantic comedy,” she writes, “... offers an alternative to the passive and suffering heroines of melodrama” (56). The same year this essay came out, Rowe published *The Unruly Woman*, the book that rigorously theorized this heroine and connected her to a long tradition not only in film and television but in literature, claiming her antecedents in Medieval drama and Chaucer.

Pinpointing a *particular* figure and tradition, Rowe sidestepped the universalizing tendencies of previous scholarship on women and humor that had made the topic less appealing for poststructuralist studies. Feminist work on women’s literary humor had begun in the 1980s, as part of the burgeoning enterprise of feminist literary criticism. Judy Little’s 1983 book, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism*, was the first to make a claim for feminist humor, tracing a literary tradition of women writers using wit, parody, and satire to protest gender norms. Nancy A. Walker in her 1988 book *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* cautioned that not all women’s humor can be characterized as feminist, but that comedy is indeed a powerful vehicle for gendered critique. In the 1988 anthology Walker co-edited with Zita Dresner, *Redressing the Balance: American Women’s Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s*, Walker and Dresner proposed a theory of *feminine humor* to characterize the comic strategies used by women to protest their unequal status. In the next six years, four anthologies of feminist scholarship on women’s literary, stand-up, television, and film comedy were published, establishing women’s comedy as a valid history and making a strong case for its feminist significance.[6]

This pioneering work, appearing at a time when studies in humor were narrowly focused on a male canon, was exciting in its implications but limited in its theoretical frameworks, which questioned neither feminism nor gender as categories of inquiry. Feminist cinema studies, with its agenda to expose and critique patriarchal narratives, was unlikely to embrace this relatively utopian

approach to comedy. However, the anthology in which Rowe published “Comedy, Melodrama and Gender” shows feminist scholars beginning to explore the importance of comedy films for women. In addition to Rowe’s essay challenging us to rethink romantic comedy, Kristine Karnick and Tina Olsin Lent contributed meticulously-researched historical studies of classic screwball comedies in that volume.[7]

The Unruly Woman further pushed that challenge, and more than that, it gave us the first wholly new theoretical model of a specific comic female figure, the excessive female epitomized by François Rabelais’ mythical Gargamelle, who is cited by cultural historian Natalie Zemon Davis as the “woman on top.” “She eats, drinks, and has sex voraciously,” Rowe writes. “She is a maker of jokes, and obscene ones at that” (36). Invoking narrative theory and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, Rowe reveals the through-line from Chaucer’s Wife of Bath to Roseanne Barr.



François Rabelais' mythical Gargamelle

In the previous decade, Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque had been getting attention mainly in literary studies, although Mary Russo’s book *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, which appeared the year before *The Unruly Woman*, uses Bakhtin to look at the female grotesque in drama and the horror genre as well. But while Russo takes Bakhtin through the darker passages of David Cronenberg and Angela Carter, Rowe goes directly to Miss Piggy as a way to ground her theory and to celebrate madcap female exuberance.

Although *The Unruly Woman* does not include queer bodies and the bodies of women of color in its analysis, its celebration of marginalized bodies opens the door for analysis of the myriad bodies excluded by earlier feminist film theory. When I teach Rowe’s book these days, I’m always surprised my students don’t know Mae West, but they know and adore Miss Piggy, and in a flash they make the connection to Melissa McCarthy, Leslie Jones, Apera Nancherla, Tig Notaro, Mindy Kaling, Lena Dunham, and Maria Bamford.

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Melissa McCarthy



Lena Dunham



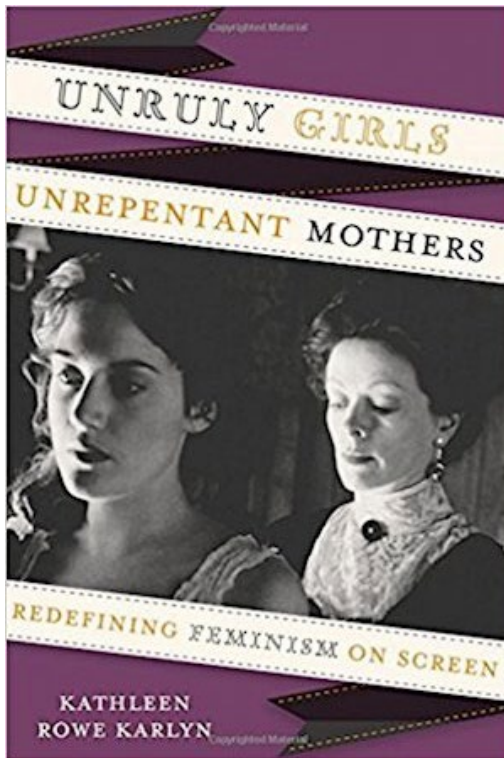
Mindy Kaling (above) and Leslie Jones (right)



Indeed, the recent prominence of women comedians in multiple popular media confirms Rowe's belief in the power of women's antiauthoritarian comedy. Rowe's work has been followed by the feminist comedy scholarship of Lori Landay, Kristen Wagner Anderson, Pamela Robertson, Kristen Hatch, Maggie Hennefeld, Kirsten Leng, Rebecca Krefting, Candace Moore, and Jennifer Reed, among others, and its salience is exemplified in the "Gender and Comedy" special edition of *Feminist Media Histories*, Spring, 2017, which covers topics ranging from Amy Schumer and Luvvie Ajayi to Italian and Brazilian cinema.

Rowe's 2011 book (as Kathleen Rowe Karlyn) returns to the relationship between comedy and melodrama as the pivoting modes of telling women's stories. *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism On Screen* speaks to the very heart of feminism itself by focusing on mothers and daughters—that is, acknowledging feminism as a history of perpetual bickering and passionate connections. The wisdom of this second book is its refusal to let melodrama have the final word on either feminism or the stories of mothers and daughters but rather to point to different narratives that imagine other kinds of stories, as Rowe Karlyn finds in the horror film as well as in the "wicked powerful" feminism of Marleen Gorris's *Antonia's Line* (1995). Likewise, this book asks what wicked powerful feminism looks like when it's queer, Black, Asian, or older, and it returns to the often-spurned maternal figure (consider Marie Dressler and Moms Mabley) to imagine a feminism that "embraces a motherline or connection among women of all ages, across history" (253).

This is a utopian vision, especially given our current historical moment in which women's rights, voices, and bodies are imperiled not only by political leaders but by divisions among women ourselves. Yet some of this century's most raucous and defiant women's comedy has emerged from that very moment as well, affirming the tenaciousness of women with big mouths, laughing hysterically, acting out, acting up.





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Notes

1. Patricia Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy," in *Studies in Entertainment*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1986), 80-95.

2. See Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987.) Also see Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 69-79).

3. Ramona Curry lays out this interpretation in *Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1996).

4. Lucy Fischer, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child: Comedy and Matricide," in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew S. Horton (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991), 60-78. In the same vein, the absent mother and fear of women in comedy is Tania Modleski's theme in "Three Men and Baby M," in *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), 76-89.

5. See Pamela Robertson's description of the feminist tension with gay men about camp's misogynist strains, included in her book that makes a definitive case for the power of feminist camp, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham and London: Duke, 1996), 3-8.

6. *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York, London, Paris, Montreaux, Tokyo, and Melbourne: Gordon and Breach, 1988); *Women's Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991); *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York, London, Paris, Montreaux, Tokyo, and Melbourne: Gordon and Breach, 1992); *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*, ed. Gail Finney (London and New York: 1994).

7. Kristine Brunovska Karnick, "Commitment and Reaffirmation in Hollywood Romantic Comedy" and Tina Olsin Lent, "Romantic Love and Friendship: The Redefinition of Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 123-46 and 314-31.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Poster for the Melissa McCarthy-Sandra Bullock buddy cop film *The Heat* (2013), which brings a pop-feminist spin to the cop film.



McCarthy in GQ magazine with husband and collaborator Ben Falcone illustrating the dominance, sexuality, and implied violence of the unruly woman.

Unruly bodies and body image heroines: corpulent femininity, Melissa McCarthy, and pop-feminism in the age of Trump

by [Russell Meeuf](#)

Actress and comedian Melissa McCarthy has been on a roll lately. Since her breakout performance in *Bridesmaids* in 2010—which earned her a rare Oscar nomination for a female comic—McCarthy has had a string of box office successes that bring a pop-feminist spin to typically male genres, most notably in her other collaborations with *Bridesmaids* director Paul Fieg. In *The Heat* (2013) she and Sandra Bullock reimagine the buddy-cop film. In *Spy* (2015) she deflates the masculinist pretensions of the spy thriller. And in *Ghostbusters* (2016) she and the rest of the all-female ghostbuster crew poke fun at the online, fan-boy culture that bristled at the idea of a woman ghostbuster. While also starring in the CBS sitcom *Mike & Molly* (2010–2016), she has leveraged her box office success over the last seven years to write and produce her own films, from *Tammy* (2014) and *The Boss* (2016) to the forthcoming *Life of the Party* (2018), all directed by her husband and collaborator Ben Falcone. Her successes made her the 4th highest paid actress in Hollywood in 2017 (Robehmed), and in the early months of the Trump administration, McCarthy became a darling of left-wing politics for her raucous and cross-gender impersonation of embattled (and now former) White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer on *Saturday Night Live*.

On the back of this success, the popular press has celebrated McCarthy as a powerful role model and an icon of progressive gender politics who undercuts the cult of thinness in Hollywood. In 2011 *Ladies' Home Journal* proclaimed that McCarthy is “proof you don’t have to look a certain way to have wonderful things happen to you” (Harmon 20) and in 2012 stated that, “Melissa McCarthy is giving women everywhere the confidence to embrace who they are” (Newman 84). *Good Housekeeping* wrote in 2012 that, “In an industry obsessed with youthful, toothpick-slim actresses, McCarthy has never let her age or her shape become an issue” (Keeps 134). As a feature in *Redbook* in 2014 put it,

“She’s sweetly silly, but also a ballsy barrier-breaker. She looks more like your neighbor than a Barbie. Instead of griping about Hollywood, she simply changed it” (Rochin 92).

Thus the cover of a 2014 *Rolling Stone* declared McCarthy “Fearless, Fierce, and Funny” while picturing her as a tough, empowered crusader. This persona as a tough, progressive role model would only be cemented on social media thanks to her digs at the Trump administration while playing Sean Spicer on *SNL*.

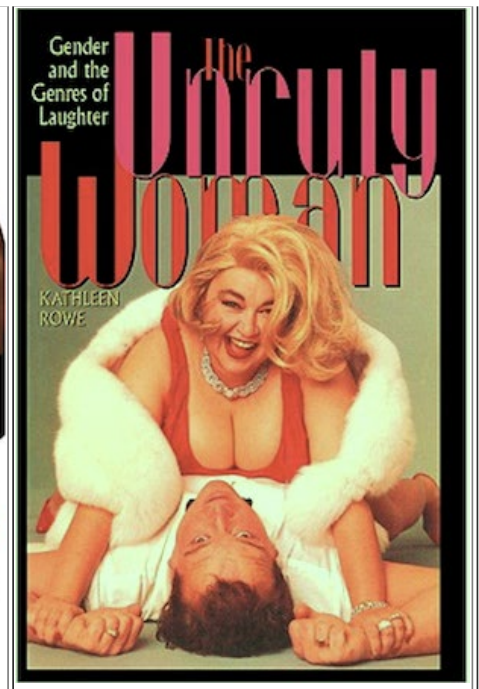




Promotional materials for McCarthy's 2013 film *Identity Thief*, in which she plays the unruly foil to a polite and emasculated middle class man played by Jason Bateman.



McCarthy on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2014, showcasing her place in the culture as an icon of women's empowerment.



Kathleen Karlyn's foundational 1995 book *The Unruly Woman*, which uses Roseanne as one case study among many to illustrate the power and pleasures of the unruly woman in popular culture.



McCarthy as Barb Kellner, one of her many characters on *Saturday Night Live* who is costumed to suggest low social class.

McCarthy, then, seems to be the heir apparent to the corpulent and unruly star at the heart of Kathleen Karlyn's foundational 1995 book *The Unruly Woman*: the comedian Roseanne Barr (popularly known simply as Roseanne). For Karlyn, Roseanne's gruff but loving working class persona in her sitcom *Roseanne* (1988-1997) undercut the patriarchal expectations for women to be thin, quiet, and deferential, all while skewering a pretentious vision of feminism that spoke for affluent white women while ignoring women of the working class. Roseanne's size, class-standing and willingness to mock patriarchal systems made legible a series of cultural contradictions that resonate still today:

“a fat woman who is sexually ‘normal’; a sloppy housewife who is also a good mother; a loose woman who is tidy, who hates matrimony but loves her husband, and who can mock the ideology of true womanhood yet consider herself a Domestic Goddess” (Karlyn 91).

Like Roseanne, Melissa McCarthy's comedy transgresses a host of patriarchal norms concerning appropriate feminine behavior, celebrating her exuberant and often-crass mockery of men and male-dominated bureaucracies. She is often paired with bland, middle-class men who represent male institutions (for example, Jason Bateman in *Identity Thief*, Jude Law in *Spy*, and often Jason Sudekis when she hosts *Saturday Night Live*), providing a loud and lewd challenge to the normal rules of femininity and bourgeois decorum. Alternatively, she is also paired with middle-class white women seeking self-fulfillment (Kristen Wiig in *Bridesmaids*, Sandra Bullock in *The Heat*, Kristen Bell in *The Boss*), inspiring them to make room for themselves in a patriarchal culture by being louder and more self-confident.

Additionally, like Roseanne, McCarthy's performances rely on the imagery of low social class to undercut middle-class expectations for women. From sporting bowling shirts and capris in *Bridesmaids* to her big-haired performance in *Identity Thief*, McCarthy's film roles link her outrageous and sometimes violent antics to imagery of tastelessness and “bad” fashion. And as I note elsewhere, in almost all her work as a guest host of *Saturday Night Live* she is costumed to suggest “bad taste” and a “trashy” sensibility (Meeuf, “Class, Corpulence, and



The trope of the unruly woman has a long history in Hollywood, including the films of Mae West, whose curvy figure was both desirable and morally repugnant in the 1930s.



McCarthy recently cemented her status as a progressive icon by satirizing the short stint of Sean Spicer as White House Press Secretary for the Trump administration. How might the implications of her unruliness change in the age of Trump?

Neoliberal Citizenship”).

However, as Karlyn documents, Roseanne became a lightning rod for controversy in the late 80s and early 90s. Like most unruly women, she was both popular and despised in the culture, an ambivalent source of humor but also a source of fear and anxiety. Along with the incessant tabloid coverage of her marriage to actor Tom Arnold—which portrayed them as out-control and violent—her performance singing the national anthem at a San Diego Padres game in 1990 became the most visible manifestation of these anxieties about her femininity. In her performance of the song, she sang off-key and ended the song by spitting and grabbing her crotch as she parodied the crass, masculine behavior that we accept as normal in baseball. She was excoriated in the press for mocking not only the national anthem but seemingly the national pastime as well (Karlyn 51-54)

If Roseanne’s unruly comedy inspired so much anxiety about gender and social class in U.S. pop culture, then why has Melissa McCarthy become America’s sweetheart? Why is McCarthy so seemingly adored for performances of crass femininity and thumbing her nose at patriarchal institutions while Roseanne was so controversial? What has changed in U.S. culture that has made space for an unruly star such as McCarthy? And, importantly, have the meanings of McCarthy’s pop-feminist persona changed in the age of Trump after the electorate seemingly rejected the vision of inclusivity that a star like McCarthy represents?

As I claim in my recent book *Rebellious Bodies: Stardom, Citizenship and the New Body Politics*, McCarthy has certainly taken on the mantle of the most prominent unruly comedian in U.S. pop culture. However, McCarthy’s success also shows that the intensification of hyper-individualist, neoliberal culture in the United States has allowed McCarthy and others to make some forms of unruliness a marketable commodity for middle-class (mostly white) women looking to project self-confidence as an individual achievement. Her comedy in the Obama years is founded on a neoliberal vision of feminism that celebrates self-confidence and individual achievement without interrogating the systems of power that perpetuate discrimination and inequality.

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Roseanne on the cover of *The National Enquirer* in 1990 following her satiric performance of the national anthem at a San Diego Padres game.



Entertainment Weekly dubbed McCarthy the new queen of comedy in 2011. Why was McCarthy able to capitalize on her unruliness while Roseanne became a lightning rod for controversy?

However, the rise of Trump in the US has led to new avenues of resistance to entrenched male power for satirists such as McCarthy (and others), and her parody of Sean Spicer on *Saturday Night Live* more forcefully challenges patriarchal power than the feel-good, pop-feminism of her previous work. But in a historical moment when many media outlets are cashing in on Trump-hate click bait, has McCarthy simply replaced feel-good, self-confident unruliness with feel-good—but ultimately vacuous—Trump bashing?

Unruliness and neoliberalism

According to Karlyn, the unruly woman is a long-standing trope that demonstrates the possibilities of laughter and comedy to disrupt patriarchal systems of power, at least symbolically. The unruly woman, among other characteristics

- Dominates men
- Has an excessive or fat body
- Offers excessive speech (in “quantity, content, or tone”)
- Jokes and laughs
- Displays loose sexual behavior
- Is associated with dirt and taboo (Karlyn 31)

As Karlyn explains, figures such as the Muppet Miss Piggy also functions as an icon of unruliness through her loud antics, open sexual desire, violent outbursts, and, by virtue of being a pig, her associations with dirt and the non-human. Anne Helen Petersen’s recent book, *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman* explores several contemporary examples of unruly women celebrities, from Nicki Minaj to Lena Dunham to Kim Kardashian, demonstrating the continuing fascination with female unruliness in the United States.

The unruly woman, then, has always been deeply ambivalent, providing a symbolic challenge to patriarchal authority while simultaneously embodying misogynist ideas about out-of-control women.

McCarthy’s loud, sexual, and violent performances in film such as *Bridesmaids*,



The unruly woman is also central to the classic romantic comedy, for example Katharine Hepburn’s performance in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938).



As Anne Helen Petersen points out, contemporary pop culture is full of unruly women challenging patriarchal norms for women (and often suffering the consequences). For example, Nicki Minaj's success and unapologetic sexuality often elicits public anxiety that seeks to control black women's bodies.

The Heat, *Identity Thief*, and others make her perhaps the most popular and prominent example of unruly womanhood in the 2010s, but as I write in *Rebellious Bodies*, some of the best examples of her unruly persona come in her sketches on *Saturday Night Live*. For example, in a season 37 sketch, McCarthy plays Arlene, a woman with a bad perm, huge glasses, and low social class who makes aggressive sexual overtures to her nice but indifferent coworker, Tim, played by Jason Sudekis. As I write elsewhere:

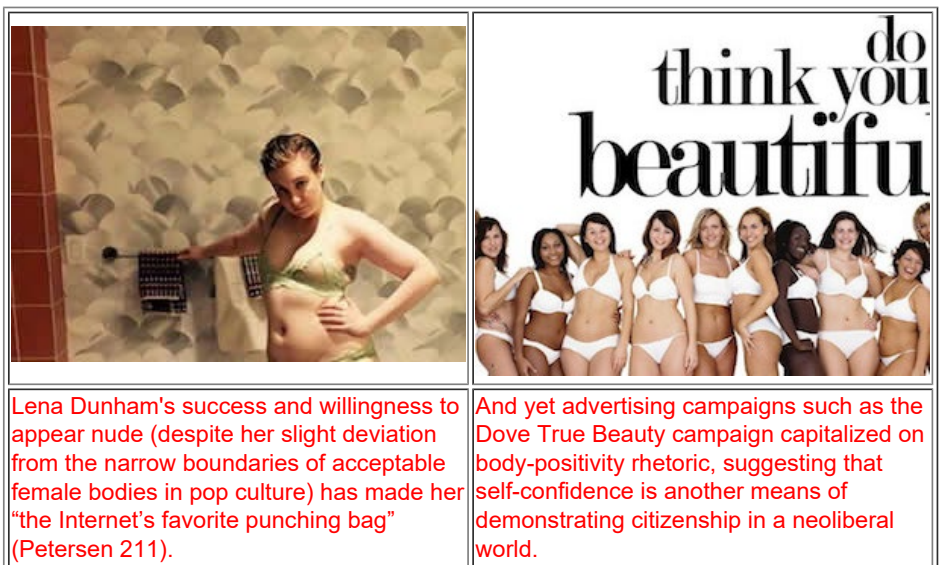
“As the sketch progresses, Arlene’s overt sexuality overwhelms Tim’s protestations as her antics become increasingly graphic and over-the-top. Rubbing his tie over her breasts, mock pole dancing on the string of a helium balloon, and licking and fellating the nose of a horse-shaped balloon, Arlene and her unbridled sexual desire (her “lady boner,” as she calls it) cannot be contained by the rules of proper office decorum or middle-class romantic values. Tim protests that he is married and has children, but Arlene only pretends to toss his wedding ring aside while continuing to rub his chest.” (Meeuf, *Rebellious Bodies* 51)

The unruly comedy here is not simply outrageous—it carefully upturns a host of assumptions about gender, sexuality, and bourgeois norms:

“These sexual excesses make a mockery of respectable, middle-class culture, using Tim as a nice, white, male, middle-class foil to Arlene’s exuberant and uncontained sexuality. In a classic example of Bakhtin’s carnival-grotesque, Arlene turns the rules of the dominant culture on their head: a bland site of corporate labor becomes a colorful place of dancing, rubbing, and sexual innuendo; appropriate feminine norms of passivity are tossed aside in favor of aggression; the nuclear family is dismissed as a hindrance to passionate sex; mock bestiality serves as a symbol for human sex acts; an overweight woman—normally a symbol of ugliness or asexuality—promotes herself as an object of sexual desire; and female sexual desire is made visible and masculine (her “lady boner”) instead of being denied as impure. Her wild, open sexuality demonstrates the ability of corpulent femininity to overwhelm and elude the structures of male control.” (Meeuf, *Rebellious Bodies* 51; for more discussion of feminine corpulence and sexuality, see Braziel)



In a neoliberal culture, media posits the centrality of self-transformation and self-confidence to a stable sense of identity, as exemplified in “lifestyle media” such as the TLC show *What not to Wear* and others that flourished in the 2000s and 2010s.



Lena Dunham's success and willingness to appear nude (despite her slight deviation from the narrow boundaries of acceptable female bodies in pop culture) has made her “the Internet’s favorite punching bag” (Petersen 211).

And yet advertising campaigns such as the Dove True Beauty campaign capitalized on body-positivity rhetoric, suggesting that self-confidence is another means of demonstrating citizenship in a neoliberal world.

However, one of the important ways that McCarthy’s unruliness deviates from Roseanne’s is the larger context of neoliberal culture surrounding McCarthy. Since Roseanne’s popularity in the late 80s and early 90s, U.S. culture has seen an

intensification of neoliberal economic policies and a hyper-individualist neoliberal culture. This larger context impacted the ways that popular media imagines inclusion and diversity and helped create a new category of celebrity that McCarthy has occupied.

As an economic doctrine, neoliberalism promotes privatization, seeking free-market alternatives to public services as part of a general transfer of social responsibility from the state to individuals. Within the context of these economic imperatives, the culture of neoliberalism in the United States has seen an increase in hyper-individualist rhetoric, a culture that increasingly privileges self-transformation, self-discipline, and self-help as central to one's identity and a prerequisite to cultural belonging. It is an individuals' responsibility to transform themselves in response to a changing world and structures of inequality (through consumption), as witnessed in the rise of transformation based reality TV and other "lifestyle media." Both Brenda Weber and Jayne Raisborough have explored this neoliberal culture of self-discipline and constant transformation, pointing to the role of reality television in shaping expectations for individual identity in a neoliberal age.

Neoliberal culture, then, has yielded two seemingly contradictory trends when it comes to corpulent femininity. On the one hand, neoliberal culture has spurred a moral panic about the so-called obesity epidemic, which stigmatizes weight as not only unhealthy but as a sign of moral degradation. From this perspective, self-transformation through diet plans and exercise are key pathways to self-actualization and cultural belonging (for more on the obesity epidemic as a moral panic, see Boero).

And yet, on the other hand, media culture has also seen an increase in body positivity rhetoric and the power of individual self-confidence, as evidenced in media campaigns such as the Dove True Beauty campaign or the success of books such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*. Reflecting a general acceptance of some feminist discourses, this media rhetoric extols the virtue of self-confidence as a form of self-discipline, especially as achieved through make-up, fashion, beauty products and personal behavior. (Meeuf, *Rebellious Bodies* 39, 56).

These two trends, of course, are simply different forms of self-discipline, suggesting two different ways that individuals should change themselves, their appearances, or their attitudes in the face of social inequalities (rather than exploring ways that social policies or the culture at large, not individuals, should transform to help create a more equitable world).



Reality competition shows such as *The Biggest Loser* demonstrate the culture's obsession with obesity as a moral and psychological failure that can only be cured by self-discipline.



Celebrities such as Mindy Kaling function

Proctor and Gamble's ill-fated 2013



Gabourey Sidibe also functions as “body image heroine” in contemporary culture, providing a high profile example of Hollywood inclusivity concerning weight and skin tone.



McCarthy in a perm wig after dousing herself in the face with Hidden Valley Ranch salad dressing on a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*. Her performances of low-class unruliness demonstrate the unshakeable self-confidence of a performer that we know is “really” a nice, middle-class mom

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| as “body image heroines,” offering feel-good narratives about increasing diversity and acceptance of different body types in Hollywood today | campaign referencing women's empowerment icon Rosie the Riveter reflects the tendency toward “marketplace feminism”— using the language of equality and empowerment to sell consumer commodities instead of interrogating the causes of gendered injustices. |

Within this neoliberal culture of intense body-disciplining, then, we have seen an emerging category of celebrity that I call *body image heroines*. These are figures like Melissa McCarthy who provide uplifting messages of the power of self-confidence and whose stories, especially in an age of social media, can be used as social justice currency to demonstrate one’s commitment to diversity rhetoric. Other examples include Gabourey Sidibe, Amy Schumer, Mindy Kaling, Rebel Wilson, Lena Dunham and others. While such figures are easy to celebrate as providing a new and important visions of inclusion in U.S. culture, they also serve the function of neoliberal individualism, suggesting that self-confidence and personal outlook are the solutions to entrenched social inequalities, all while performing the same function as other celebrities: promoting consumer culture.

Body image heroines, then, tell us that certain forms of unruliness can be packaged and marketed as “feminist” commodities in a neoliberal marketplace. Andi Zeisler’s recent book *We Were Feminists Once* documents this trend toward “marketplace feminism”—that is, using the language of equality and empowerment to sell consumer commodities instead of interrogating the causes of gendered injustices. Zeisler offers a compelling history of the incorporation of feminist empowerment rhetoric into consumer capitalism in our neoliberal age.

Melissa McCarthy’s unruliness, then, functions in service to her status as a body image heroine, as her outrageous performances of loud, crass femininity become a kind of mock unruliness, a way of demonstrating over-the-top self-confidence rather than truly transgressing gender and class norms. After all, McCarthy can put on the trappings of unruliness in her performances—spurting a bottle of Hidden Valley Ranch into her face while wearing a Mr. Spock sweatshirt in a popular sketch on *SNL*, defecating in a sink in *Bridesmaids*, sporting turtlenecks and a thick accent as vlogger Marbles Hargrove. But we are assured by entertainment journalists that she is actually a nice, wholesome, middle-class woman who can offer platitudes about self-confidence and personal success. (And, in fact, as Petersen documents, McCarthy often claims that her most outrageous performances occur while she is in a kind of “fugue state” or trance, distancing her unruliness from her “authentic” self.) She may play an unruly woman on TV, but in reality she is just an average wife and mother who can use the outrageous behavior and “bad” taste of the lower classes to demonstrate just how self-confident she is.

She told *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 2012, for example:



McCarthy on the cover of *Redbook* magazine in 2016 demonstrating that she is a nice, empowered, middle class lady (not the crass caricatures she plays on screen).

“One of my favorite things is playing someone who’s utterly confident—even if they are, just, like wrong. They’re off the beaten track. They’re not polished or perfect, but they’re so solid in their shoes. And I always think, Now that’s someone who’s interesting. They don’t give a s— what they’re supposed to be, or how they’re supposed to look. I find them mesmerizing. I think there’s greatness in not caring what other people think.” (Newman)

But her prime example of these mesmerizing individuals is “the woman at Walmart who’s happy in her cat sweater,” using the popular connotation of Walmart stores as a locus of low social class commodities and shoppers to suggest this carefree attitude.

So, is unruliness today a performance that nice, middle-class women can put on (and take off when needed) to demonstrate their self-confidence? While Roseanne’s unruliness was tied to her sense of “authentic” self, helping to make her a controversial figure in popular culture, in an age of neoliberal culture, McCarthy demonstrates the possibilities of commodifying unruliness for the safe consumption of middle-class audiences.

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Sean Spicer and anti-Trump unruliness



The 2016 presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton brought out a series of anxieties about diversity and inclusion in US culture, with Clinton running a campaign on feel-good diversity rhetoric against Trump's pleas to traditional white, male power.



Trump squeaks to victory in 2016 on a campaign designed to appeal to white men who feel left behind in an era of diversity and inclusion.



Trump-mocking YouTube star Randy Rainbow has seen his social media followers skyrocket in the age Trump, illustrating the media appetite for anti-Trump discourse.

McCarthy's fame is only one example of a larger tendency toward feel-good narratives about the new inclusivity in the United States in the Obama era. Such narratives celebrated self-confident personal success, touted the importance of diversity, but largely ignored entrenched structural inequalities and concrete policies that might address those inequalities. Obama, for example, may be a powerful cultural figure signaling changing racial attitudes and new opportunities for (some) African Americans in the United States, but as the #BlackLivesMatter movement has illustrated, there is still a significant gap between Obama's personal success and meaningful social change that gives full cultural citizenship to black communities. Likewise, McCarthy and other body image heroines may signal a general challenge to patriarchal structures that discipline and control women's bodies, but entrenched assumptions and double standards about women in the workforce remain a powerful deterrent to women's success, as Hillary Clinton found out in her 2016 presidential campaign.

Of course, Clinton had banked on the power of feel-good diversity discourses like McCarthy's. Her ad "Roar," featuring the Katy Perry song of the same name, encapsulates this strategy by offering a hopeful and positive vision of the country based on tolerance and inclusion as foundational to U.S. values. Featuring a range of diverse individuals, the ad speaks to women, people of color, LGBTQ populations, and environmentalists (among others) in an inspiring montage depicting inclusion and respect as key national ideals.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKDHioNLb4I>

Slightly more than half of the voters in the country hoped that this vision would triumph on election day, and yet instead the electoral college vote went to Donald Trump, whose campaign mixed a populist appeal to working-class whites, a xenophobic insistence that immigrants and Muslims are a threat to the nation's values, and a masculinist insistence that (white) men should be "restored" to political power (ignoring the massive political and cultural power already wielded by white men).

In retrospect, Clinton's ad and her campaign against Trump should have been a warning to liberals and progressives about the dangers of feel-good rhetoric in the face of continuing economic inequality. The ad offers inspirational images of diversity and inclusion, but the concrete policies that might actually challenge inequality were never really the main focus of Clinton's campaign, which focused its energies on shaming Trump's sexism and racism. For many voters, Clinton's promises felt empty. Those voters (mostly white) felt excluded from the vision of diversity touted by the Clinton campaign, and a wave of white resentment that had been building over the past 8 years swept Trump (barely) into office. This was not, however, a failure on just Clinton's part. It was a failure of mainstream, white, liberal politics and media more broadly, which committed themselves throughout the Obama age to feel-good narratives of diversity and inclusion while putting meaningful policy changes to address inequality on the back burner.

In the dawning of the Trump era we are seeing new forms of media discourse that veer away from feel-good affirmations of diversity and toward acerbic condemnation of Trump and right-wing politics more broadly. Tapping into the shocked but newly energized progressive movement—which launched a massive women's march, a march for science, and waves of angry town hall meetings

calling out Republicans who align themselves with Trump's agenda—left-leaning popular culture launched a barrage of parody, satire, and general outrage against the Trump administration and its representatives.



At the start of the Trump age, McCarthy rode the wave of progressive outrage with her cross-gender impersonation of former White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer.



McCarthy as Spicer wields a Super Soaker water gun against the White House press corps during a February 4th *Saturday Night Live* sketch, mocking Spicer's angry outbursts at the podium during his tenure as press secretary.



McCarthy as Spicer uses a Disney Moana doll to explain Trump's "extreme vetting" proposal for refugees during a February 11th *Saturday Night Live* sketch, mocking Spicer's tendency to patronize reporters in the White House press corps.

Riding this wave of progressive outrage was McCarthy herself in her popular impersonations of embattled White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer on *Saturday Night Live*. Throughout the presidential campaign, *SNL* led the satirical charge against Trump, impersonated by frequent *SNL* host and outspoken Trump critic Alec Baldwin. In the wake of some bizarre behavior of the new press secretary in the early days of the Trump administration (e.g., admonishing the press for publishing photos that showed Trump's inauguration crowd was significantly smaller than Obama's, explicitly lying to the press about the size of Trump's crowd, and taking an unnecessarily hostile tone with the White House Press Corps), *SNL* enlisted McCarthy to bring her trademark aggression and outrageousness to their vision of an out-of-control Trump administration.

- Feb 5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWuc18xISwI>

In a sketch from February 4th, McCarthy portrays Spicer as unhinged and full of rage at the press, especially the *New York Times*' White House correspondent Glenn Thrush (played by Bobby Moynihan). After claiming that he wants to punch the press corps in the face, McCarthy-as-Spicer gets violent with the reporters, picking up the podium and ramming one reporter who asks about his mental health and then later dousing another reporter with a Super Soaker water gun when he asks about the White House's Holocaust Remembrance Day statement that didn't mention the Jewish people. In what will become a running gag, Spicer also uses silly props to condescendingly illustrate the Trump administration's policy goals.

- Feb 12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbh3zXcNzGU>

McCarthy would reprise her role as Spicer the next week on February 11 with another performance in which Spicer uses props—in this case, a G.I. Joe action figure, a Barbie doll, and a Disney Moana doll—to explain the new forms of "extreme vetting" that the U.S. will use to scrutinize immigrants and refugees. And in more displays of over-the-top outrage against the press, McCarthy-as-Spicer turns a leaf blower onto a reporter who questions his inaccuracies about the crime rate ("That was me blowing away their dishonesty," Spicer yells) and then trying to run over the press corps with his podium, now motorized like a Segway.

- April 15 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RvfzFv3c6Y

In April, McCarthy would play Spicer again, this time dressed as the White House Easter Bunny as Spicer apologizes for his real-world statements claiming inaccurately that Hitler never used chemical weapons (and bizarrely referring to concentration camps as "Holocaust Centers").

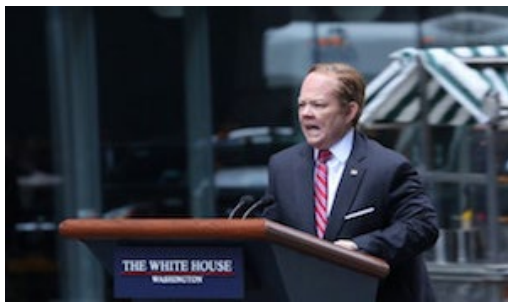
- May 13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbpUcftpbnrs>

And McCarthy reprised the role in May when she returned to host *Saturday Night Live*. This time, Spicer blasts a reporter in the groin with a fire extinguisher when he suggests that Deputy Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders should replace him, and he later removes a decorative column from the stage and launches it as the reporters. But when the reporters get Spicer to question whether Trump might fire him, Spicer takes his motorized podium to New York (and later a golf club in New Jersey) to confront Trump, who placates Spicer by tickling his belly and then forcing Spicer to kiss him (referencing the recordings of Trump released during the campaign in which he claimed that, by virtue of being a celebrity, he could force women to kiss him and "grab them by the pussy").

These sketches articulate new possibilities for McCarthy's brand of unruly



McCarthy as Spicer dressed as the White House Easter bunny in an April 15th *Saturday Night Live* sketch.



Instead of providing a polite, middle-class perspective from which to view the horrifying and unruly antics of a self-confident woman, the Spicer sketches unveil the horrifying and unruly spectacle of incompetent white masculinity taking the country on a joyride like it's a motorized podium.



McCarthy as Spicer shows off a pair of Ivanka Trump high heels, drawing out the gender play involved in the impersonation while also mocking the Trump administration's unethical promotion of Trump family businesses.

femininity. They clearly amplify already existing elements of her star persona—her penchant for violent outbursts while in character, her ability to channel rage into insults—but this time those elements are aimed at those with real social and political power. Her portrayals of women with low social class that came before the Trump era used a form of “trashy” unruliness to help sell the power of self-confident femininity, but post-Trump McCarthy is taking actual political risks by targeting bastions of male power and privilege.

Examine, for example, the differences between the Spicer sketches and the “Arlene” sketch discussed above. McCarthy-as-Arlene gently pokes fun of the standards of decorum in middle-class, male-centric institutions like the corporate office by overturning our expectations of feminine behavior, but in the sketch the polite, bland office worker Tim (Jason Sudekis) is the audience’s point of identification. The sketch is organized around Tim’s horror at having to deal with someone like Arlene (in the same ways that *Identity Thief* is organized around Jason Bateman’s horror at having to deal with McCarthy’s antics). Even if we revel in the unruly flouting of feminine social norms, the stable point of view of the well-intentioned white, male is never questioned, even if the sketch makes that perspective slightly uncomfortable.

McCarthy-as-Spicer, however, actively undermines and makes a mockery of a sense of stable, male authority. Instead of providing a polite, middle-class perspective from which to view the horrifying and unruly antics of a self-confident woman, the Spicer sketches unveil the horrifying and unruly spectacle of incompetent white masculinity taking the country on a joyride like it’s a motorized podium.

As a number of commentators have noted, the sketches are particularly effective at undermining male power through the use of comedic drag. Having McCarthy play Spicer undercuts Trump’s constant affirmation of his masculine power and mockery of his adversaries as “weak” and feminine. The cross-gender performance was also highlighted in the February 11th sketch when McCarthy-as-Spicer revealed that he was wearing a bangle and high heels from Ivanka Trump’s fashion brand (referencing the controversy when Trump spokesperson Kellyanne Conway encouraged viewers to buy Ivanka’s products when representing the administration on a news interview). These gender-crossing performances, as Eva Sealove wrote for *Out* magazine, “gestured powerfully toward the fragility of white masculinity,” especially as the sketches make clear that Spicer’s bombast only hides his immense vulnerability and frail ego. The fragility of white masculinity was also on display when Trump himself reportedly expressed dismay at one of his underlings being portrayed by a woman. According to *Politico*, “More than being lampooned as a press secretary who makes up facts, it was Spicer’s portrayal by a woman that was most problematic in the President’s eyes, according to sources close to him. And the unflattering send-up by a female comedian was not considered helpful for Spicer’s longevity in the grueling, high-profile job” (Karni, Dawsey, and Palmeri). Indeed, the sketches seemed to imperil Spicer’s position from the start, although it was Spicer himself who finally resigned the position in July of 2017 in objection to shake-ups in the President’s communications staff.

The use of comedic drag as a form of political satire, however, also poses challenges for the progressive movement, providing an opportunity to puncture the over-inflated, hyper-masculine posturing of a politician like Trump but also relying on very old and problematic tropes surrounding drag performances. As Sealove continues in *Out*:

“Female-to-male drag is not exactly new, but its application now feels important, if not entirely innovative. On the one hand, this is punchline drag. It seeks out cheap emasculation and is successful at it—‘Look! Spicer’s a woman!’ This is problematic. If the best we’ve got is to



Alec Baldwin as Donald Trump forces himself sexually on McCarthy as Sean Spicer on a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*. Does the kiss challenge the hyper-masculine and heteronormative posturing of Trump, or is it simply using homosexuality as a weapon for vacuous humor?



Alec Baldwin's mocking Trump impersonation. Have we simply replaced the superficial, feel-good narratives of Obama era politics with superficial, feel-good lambasting of Trump?



Anne Helen Petersen's book, *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman*, has helped illustrate the centrality of the unruly woman to today's debates about gender and power in the US. Here, her book is excerpted on the *Huffington Post*.

weaponize femininity in order to knock Trump's inner circle down by a few pegs, we are in trouble. On the other hand, if McCarthy's impression makes Spicer appear 'weak,' it's only according to his definition of weakness, and to Trump's, and is therefore, something of a perfect trap."

Mirroring the essential ambivalence of the unruly woman, McCarthy's drag performance overturns the middle-class, patriarchal order of things and yet also offers cheap laughs that only seem to reinforce the misogynistic logic of the Trump movement.

These ambivalences are only exacerbated by the May 13th Spicer sketch that culminates with Trump forcing himself sexually onto Spicer. On the one hand, the forced kiss in the sketch demonstrates that Trump's acts of sexual violence (whether real or boasts) are not products sexual desire per se but products of power and domination. As in all cases of sexual harassment and assault, Trump possibly groping women and then bragging about groping women aren't expressions of lust but rather expressions of subjugation, using forced sexual contact to dominate women and assert his privileged position in the social order. By forcing himself on a male subordinate in the sketch, the sketch demands that the audience see those actions as expressions of social power. Whether Trump desires women or men or women dressed as men is not really the point—instead, the sketch shows how Trump uses forced sexual contact or threats of forced sexual contact to assert power and assuage his white, male fragility.

And yet the sketch also uses the specter of homosexuality to needle Trump, as if the best insult the writers can think of to lob at Trump is that he might be gay. On a certain level, the sketch conforms to the same homophobic logic used by Trump and the conservative movement more broadly to use homosexuality as a stand-in for weakness and emasculation, even if the sketch is simply using Trump's own logic against him. Where do we draw the line between meaningful political satire and cheap insults?

McCarthy's unruly, drag performances as Sean Spicer, then, suggest the possibility that popular media have simply replaced the superficial, feel-good narratives of Obama era politics with superficial, feel-good lambasting of Trump. Instead of uplifting narratives about the new possibilities for inclusion and diversity (narratives that have often ignored the structural causes of inequality), the Trump era is quickly becoming marked by outrage-fueled narratives casting Trump as a cartoonish villain. This is not to suggest that Trump's racism, misogyny, corruption, heartless policy positions, and general incompetence shouldn't induce outrage. Rather, we should question whether or not the spectacle of hating Trump across mainstream and left-leaning media is yet another form of neoliberal consumption that feels good for many people but leaves little space for media discourse on, say, mass incarceration, income and wealth inequality, or climate change. After all, some of the primary beneficiaries of the flourishing anti-Trump sentiment today are media industries, who are cashing in on the demand for Trump hate. But Trump didn't invent the inequalities that have been cultivated by both political parties for decades, and mocking him won't end those inequalities; but mocking him sure will increase profits for media companies.

Conclusion

At the center of these questions about media culture today, naturally, is the figure of the unruly woman. As Karlyn argues, the unruly woman has long been a cultural figure capable of drawing out the anxieties and fragility of patriarchal culture, even if her transgressive behavior marks her as an object of ridicule or disgust. In moments of cultural or political crisis, the unruly woman is often there, deflating the pretensions of bourgeois masculinity, giving voice to the culture's angst about power and those who wield it, and offering the complex pleasures of taboo and transgression.



Some of the original cast of *Roseanne* appeared live as ABC announced the return of the sitcom for an 8-episode return in 2018. In the age of Trump, will *Roseanne*'s unruly comedy resonate again?

Throughout much of the Obama years, Melissa McCarthy (and others) filled that role, demonstrating the extent to which unruliness can be commodified in neoliberal culture as a marker of self-confidence and individual achievement. But with the dawning of the Trump administration, will the images of unruly women in celebrity culture become icons of resistance to entrenched male power or yet more commodities fueling neoliberal media industries?

The answer to this may come from McCarthy's comedic future or perhaps from the unruly woman that preceded her: ABC recently announced that it was bringing back the sitcom *Roseanne* with the original cast for an eight-episode reboot that will run in 2018 (France). As U.S. politics have shifted focus onto the white working class in the wake of Trump, *Roseanne*'s iconic character and her family are jumping back into the fray, demonstrating just how central the unruly woman is to the cultural and political anxieties in the United States today.

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Challenging the myth of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl

by [Rachael Weir](#)

The term and its meanings

In a 2007 *A.V. Club* review for the movie *Elizabethtown*, film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term “Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” which has since become a regular descriptor in pop-culture vernacular. Rabin defined this as a common cinematic character type: it refers to a female character who “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (Rabin, “Bataan”). [\[open references in new window\]](#) Manic Pixie Dream Girls are quirky, atypical, free spirited women who act as inspirations for male protagonists who search for higher meaning in their lives. These women usually seem to come out of nowhere; little background information is given about them. Such a narrative tactic effectively dehumanizes them and establishes their fantasy status as muse.

After encountering the trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, I was reminded of certain characters from ancient Greek mythology, Nereids, sea nymphs who would appear to guide distressed sailors to safety. The survival of such an ancient mythical female throughout history and in art and literature reveals the persistence of this myth in world culture about a female muse as savior of men. She reappears not only in screenplays but in the longer tradition of storytelling. Considering how ingrained in culture this female role as muse and savior is, it's worth examining further its presence in film, a more modern form of storytelling. Furthermore, as a feminist, I would like to think about alternate ways film could be used to fight such a reductive character trope. In fact, I've seen that one of the most effective challenges to the Manic Pixie Dream Girl occurs when a film turns that trope around so that it becomes a weapon against itself. In other words, the screenplay takes the trope apart within the film narrative itself.

Before going into further depth regarding films which embrace this character trope and films which deconstruct it, I would like to address some *critiques* of the journalistic use of the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl. Over the years, the term has been used about many female characters who are quirky and beautiful, so much in fact that it has lost much of its meaning. It also has raised a controversy among feminists, many of whom believe that the term shouldn't be used at all due to its increasing ubiquity and proportionately decreasing substance as a critical tool. Thus, in an *AV Club* article released in August 2008, a year after the coining of the term, a list was released which cited even more examples of Manic Pixie dream girls in film. (Rabin, “Wild”) I found it interesting that this list included Annie Hall, who in my opinion is not a Manic Pixie Dream Girl. I realized that the addition of dynamic female characters to the canon of the Manic Pixie Dream Girls subverted viewers away from understanding that a film's self-aware use of

the trope could be used to draw attention to misogyny in filmmaking. In the case of Annie Hall, just because Annie Hall wore menswear and was unique, that did not make her a Manic Pixie Dream Girl. She had her own goals and pursuits and in the end, chose not to be with the male protagonist.

Because of the broadening definition of the trope had come simply to define quirky and whimsical female characters, some feminist critics struck back. For example, in a *Rookie* article, Gabby Noone wrote, “just because I like cute stuff doesn’t mean I’m shallow, or that I live to make guys feel more adventurous and deep.” In an observation aimed at a critique of lazy writing, Monika Baryzel wrote in a 2013 article for *The Week*,

"this once-useful piece of critical shorthand has devolved into laziness and sexism... 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' was useful when it commented on the superficiality of female characterizations in male dominated journeys, but it has since devolved into a pejorative way to deride unique women in fiction and reality."

I have to admit, the feminist critiques of the proliferation of the term over the years made me reconsider my own position of finding these female characters appealing. I thought, am I contributing to sexist stereotyping of women? What’s my social responsibility as a movie viewer? There may well be women who feel that they are being told that they aren’t multidimensional, that they aren’t real, because they have a pixie haircut, wear vintage clothing and like to bake. The broadening definition of a term that may be pejorative has allowed for broadened interpretation, and even application to real women. In this vein, in a 2014 apology for coining the term, Nathan Rabin wrote,

“...By giving an idea a name and a fuzzy definition, you apparently also give it power. And in my case, that power spun out of control” (Rabin, “I’m sorry”)

Because of the term’s over-extended application, I hope to be more specific in my analysis of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl characterization and how that trope has been used by filmmakers. The type is not simply about traits, interests, and quirkiness. In this essay, I will present a clearer definition of the trope based not only on how the characters are scripted but also in terms of the cinematic techniques used to enhance the “mysticism” of the female characters as opposed to emphasizing their ordinary human traits.

Two films that use the trope uncritically

To refresh the reader’s memory, I will provide two examples of films which include Manic Pixie Dream Girl characters. Both of these films limit the female characters embodying this trope through both narrative and cinematic means.

Ruby Sparks (2012), written, directed and starred in (as supporting actress) by Zoey Kazan, is a film about a man named Calvin (Paul Dano) who experiences writer’s block and then materializes his dream girl by writing her into existence. Throughout several trials of making adjustments to his dream girl, Calvin faces the consequences of having full agency over her behavior and of bringing a fantasy into the real world.



Ruby first appears in the opening shot of the film in one of the few long shots that she is afforded throughout this film. In ordinary cinematic practice, a longshot gives a character freedom to walk freely throughout the frame and, effectively, through the world of the film. In this instance, she seems to have a kind of independence alone in this space of physical freedom. At the same time, due to backlighting, Ruby appears in featureless shadow, which takes away her identity. And since the composition makes her look like she is walking among the clouds, the image establishes her as an angelic fantasy from the very beginning.

During the end of this first shot of Ruby, the sound of an alarm clock begins to ring, and we cut to the image of Calvin, the protagonist, waking up. This signals that she was just a dream. Not real.



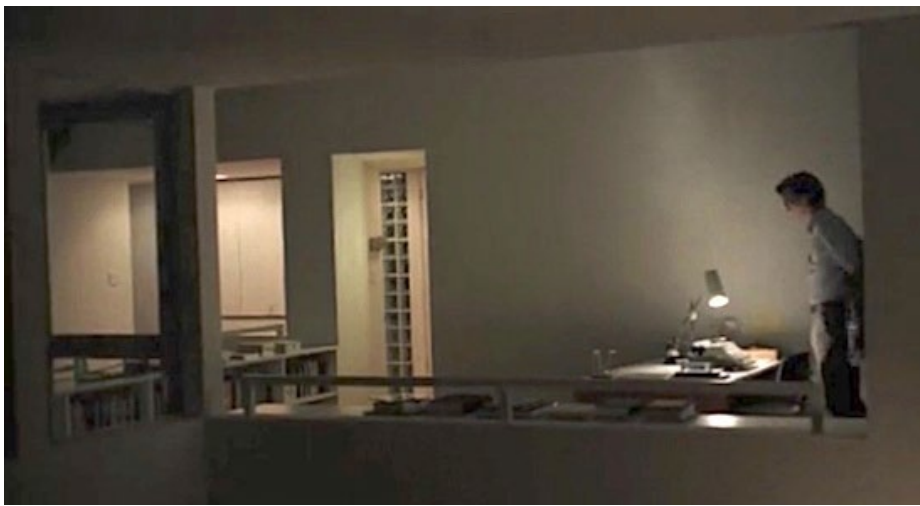
In a later scene, as Calvin talks to his therapist, we learn that he is a troubled writer. He admits his dream about Ruby and says that he is writing about her and consequentially falling in love with a fictional character.



As he lays on his back in his therapist's office, he describes Ruby's characteristics, her quirks, her interesting past—one of her first crushes was John Lennon, she can't drive a car, and she had an affair with her high school teacher. As he tells her history, we see a visualization of this description but it is a transparent image laid on top of the image of the air vent on the ceiling that Calvin is looking at as he lays on the sofa. This transparency of the image emphasizes the fact that Ruby is still just an idea, a seemingly unique and different kind of woman, but still solely an inspiration for this uninspired writer.



Soon after Calvin starts writing about Ruby, he wakes to find her in his home and is startled that his writing has materialized a woman. This low angle looking down on Ruby is one of the few times that Ruby gets a longshot all to herself which, in theory, should afford her independence and freedom within the frame as previously discussed, but once again, cinematic choices detract from her potential for autonomy. The visual impact of this low angle shot from Calvin's perspective is to establish his power over her in the first scene that Ruby "exists" as a physical person.



This is one of several shots in which Calvin appears in a long shot, but in his case, there is nothing to cancel out the freedom that comes with the long shot. He is about to sit down at his typewriter, which is the way he has complete power over Ruby. Anything he writes about her comes true. When Ruby starts to attain her own life, make friends, and isn't spending every second with Calvin, he doesn't like it, and so he writes that she is miserable without him. So she is.



Once more, Ruby gets a longshot, but it's flooded with other people and it also only occurs because Calvin is looking back at her after he lets go of her hand. He sees she is crying because she is "miserable without him." After Calvin realizes he can't have any life apart from Ruby even for a second, he writes that she is happy, but she seems *too* happy. Then, Calvin writes that she is "just Ruby," happy or sad, but as a result she becomes too moody for him.



In the climactic scene, Calvin admits to Ruby that he has control over her. He demonstrates by making her speak French, do a striptease, violently snap her fingers, and shout her love for him repeatedly. She eventually collapses on the floor, heaving in exhaustion. In close up, the camera pans down Ruby's body, effectively breaking up her image into pieces within the frame and reducing her into an objectified character who has been conquered and made less whole. Laura Mulvey has theorized this fragmentation of the female body in film, "Once part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth... it gives flatness, the quality of a cut out..."(838). And Mulvey's characterization of the cut out is a fitting description as well of the dehumanizing and puppeteer-like relationship between Calvin and Ruby.





Admitting his guilt in making and controlling a fantasy woman, Calvin frees Ruby from him. Calvin's voice over is heard over a sequence of shots showing him moving on with his life, walking his dog, finishing his book. The voice over then matches up with Calvin performing a reading of his latest work at a book release party:

"In the hope that she will not read this and reproach me, I have withheld many telling details: Her name, the particulars of her birth and upbringing, and any identifying scars or birthmarks."



For a moment, it appeared as if Calvin has redeemed himself and truly freed Ruby, but in the end, he still keeps her identity for himself in fear of her “reproaching him.”



In the last scene Calvin is surprised to see Ruby in the park, the same setting where he bonded with her in his dreams (before she physically materialized). Visually, the physical placement of Calvin standing over Ruby for most of this scene maintains the sense of Calvin’s power. Because Calvin had freed Ruby from her past, she seems to have no memory of the way he tortured her. He has another chance; their potential relationship is starting out the exact same way it did in his dreams. This film had a lot of potential to make a statement against the fantasizing of women by tortured artist male characters, but narratively, it put the power back into the male protagonist’s hands by maintaining the male character’s cinematic advantage. Scriptwise and cinematically, the two characters were not treated equally, especially in terms of independence and freedom.

Stranger than Fiction

Stranger Than Fiction (2006), directed by Marc Forster and written by Zach Helm, is a film about Harold Crick (Will Ferrell). Harold is scripted as a dual character: a “real” man but is also a fictional one—from a novel being written by famed author Kay Eiffel (Emma Thompson). The “real” Harold can hear her voice narrating his mundane life as he brushes his teeth and goes to work.



In his job as an IRS agent, Harold is sent to audit Ana Pascal (Maggie Gyllenhaal),

who has refused to pay all of her taxes for moral reasons. She is rebellious, tattooed, and a baker— clearly not mainstream.





In visual terms, the editing in this scene clearly “fantasizes” Ana. This editing method utilizes eye line matches to imply Harold is staring at Ana as she licks her finger. This kind of shot-reverse shot exemplifies the male gaze, theorized by Laura Mulvey, as a phenomenon in which women and the worlds they inhabit are presented from a masculine perspective, as perceived both by the male protagonist and then by the audience who sees what he sees:

“The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.”

Over this sequence, a narrator says that Harold “couldn’t help but imagining Mrs. Pascal stroking the side of his face with the soft blade of his finger.” Even within the narrative, Harold “freezes the flow of action” by stopping his job to stare at, objectify, and fantasize about Ana’s body.



Ana becomes the reason for Harold to change, to become more altruistic and independent, and she falls for him when he brings her flowers and plays a song on her guitar. We know nothing of her past apart from the fact that she went to law school and she is ultimately lacking in any real dimension. It’s interesting that in a film about a man who feels he has no power over his life (and whose story is being written), the most powerless character in the film is Ana, who is reduced to an erotically desirable object — rebellious yet simultaneously quaint and domestic (she bakes him cookies). She fulfills the fantasies of the male lead.

Both *Ruby Sparks* and *Stranger than Fiction* feature women who have an interesting style, unique beauty, and are clearly not part of the mainstream. In spite of the characters' potential interest, through editing and shot choices, both films also present these women within the filmic space as simultaneously less than human and more fantastic than human. Ana and Ruby could be much more interesting characters. Ana has strong principles against contributing to a corrupt society and Ruby is an intelligent painter. In the end, both women are delegated to being just "supports," serving as fantasies and inspiration to their male counterparts, men who have aspirations and are both "searching for answers." In contrast, the muses don't seem to have a complex interior life or history.

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Challenging the myth: two case studies

I would like to consider how challenges to the myth of woman as muse/savior are worked out in two films that come from very different time periods, geography, and cultures — *Jules et Jim* (1962), directed by Francois Truffaut, and *500 Days of Summer* (2009), directed by Marc Webb. I chose such different works to indicate just how timeless and universal the female muse trope is and how the effort to challenge the trope must be ongoing. These films suggest that an alternative to the objectified and reductive trope might come from creating a more textured, more “realistic” female character.

Francois Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* presents two, professionally and romantically lost, male friends (Oscar Werner and Henri Serre respectively) who fall in love with the same woman: Catherine (Jeanne Moreau). This film was released long before the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl arose, and thus it reveals the long life and international spread of the female muse/savior trope. In fact, Catherine in *Jules et Jim* not only fits the woman as savior stereotype but even has other specific characteristics of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. We see that both in the script and in the visual aspect, such as editing and cinematography. When Catherine appears on screen for the first time, for example, she is quickly identifiable as an object of inspiration or as a muse, rather than an independent subject.

This introductory sequence features several pronounced and quick jump cuts framing Catherine in medium close ups, close ups, and extreme close ups from different perspectives, so that every aspect of her face is exhibited. These close ups communicate that from the perspective of the two male leads, her appearance defines her, at least initially. It is a very common cinematic tactic, theorized in Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”—presenting the female star in “stylized and fragmented by close-ups [because] directors shoot the female body in pieces through close-ups of the legs, breasts and other body parts” (841). [\[open references in new window\]](#) This technique immediately assigns Catherine the role of fantasy object for the male leads and for the viewer by means of identifying with the protagonists. In addition, the way the film restricts Catherine’s space through spatially-restricting close ups also illustrates a more general principle: Manic Pixie Dream Girl characters are confined not only in the plot but also in the filmic space.



Furthermore, Catherine becomes a fantasy woman through the way that the cutting slows down time by showing different perspectives of the same moment. Narratively, Jules and Jim perceive briefly that time has stopped because Catherine has entered their lives. Again, it is as Mulvey suggests: “For a moment, the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no-man’s land outside of its own time and space. (838)” The way the editing of the close ups manipulates time sets Catherine’s character up as the fantasy dream girl arriving to save the men from tedium and lack of direction in their lives.

The above sequence also has editing and framing similar to a sequence earlier in the film when Jules and Jim visit an Adriatic statue that they conclude is the “perfect woman.” Rapid jump cuts and close up shots of the statue from different POV’s resemble the editing and shots used when Catherine is introduced. So once again, this association of Catherine with a statue, through similar editing and cinematography, solidifies the notion that she’s an objectified fantasy girl. Such visuals objectify in an explicit sense too because the imagery poses a question about immobility and silence. That is, even though Jules and Jim value the quality of intelligence and stimulating conversation in in each other as male peers, their dream girl, in contrast, seems to be beautiful but speechless and without agency.

Although Catherine ‘s qualities initially conform to those of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, later as she seems to realize that Jules and Jim have projected this limiting role onto her, she begins to resist them. These acts of resistance ultimately lead the narrative to deconstruct any association of Catherine with the trope. For example, she resists expectations by dressing as a man, jumping into a river after overhearing a sexist conversation, and even by proving that she is not the ideal wife or mother when she leaves her family for months at a time to have several affairs.



Through this gradual yet continuous manifestation of resistance, Catherine exerts her own agency, finally by committing suicide and taking Jim with her. One way to read her seemingly destructive act is that it is her way of liberating herself from being an object of inspiration, from being the men’s unrealistic fantasy. Even though Catherine’s characterization predates Rabin’s coining of the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl, it deconstructs the trope, with her final act protesting the inequality inherently associated with such a figure.

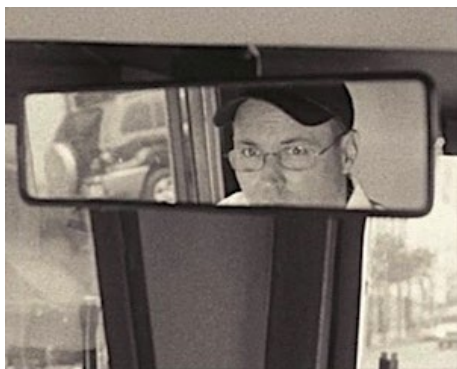
The contrasting film that I wish to consider that challenges the myth of woman as muse/savior and the Manic Pixie trope in particular is *500 Days of Summer*

(2009), directed by Marc Webb. If you google “Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” *500 Days of Summer* comes up relentlessly as an example. The female lead Summer (Zooey Deschanel) seemingly walks into the male protagonist, Tom’s (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), life; she comes out of nowhere with no background information, as the Manic Pixie Dream Girl typically does. She also has the quirky manic pixie girl traits, as seen in her effortless vintage style, her unusual fixation with her hair, and the fact that she’s probably the only girl at the office party who sings Nancy Sinatra at karaoke.

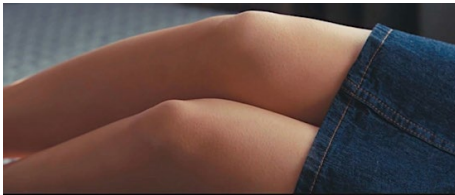
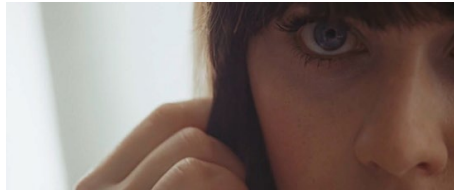
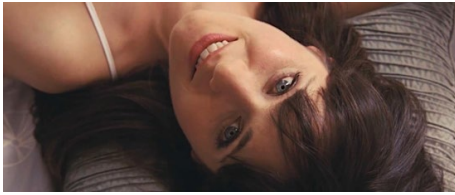
Deschanel has been in other roles that could be considered Manic Pixie Dream Girl roles, such as her portrayal of the wackily dressed and inexplicably moody mall elf, Jovie in *Elf* (2003), directed by Jon Favreau, and of the spontaneous Allison in *Yes Man* (2008), directed by Peyton Reed.

500 Days of Summer’s director may have made a conscious decision to cast an actress viewed as a Manic Pixie Dream Girl in order to set up the character before pushing back against the trope’s requirements. The film gradually constructs a more complex female character, much like Catherine’s gradual shift in *Jules et Jim*. It is also worth noting that lead actor, Joseph Gordon Levitt, interpreted his character in relation to the trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. In a *Playboy* interview he said, “[Tom] develops a mildly delusional obsession over a girl onto whom he projects all these fantasies. He thinks she’ll give his life meaning because he doesn’t care about much else going on in his life” (Soghomonian).

Summer is introduced in line with this trope. Where *Jules et Jim* introduces Catherine as an object of the male gaze through cinematography and editing techniques, Summer is explained through a voice-over explicitly telling us that she is an object of inspiration and a fantasy for men. On Summer’s way to work, the voice says, “she averaged 18.4 double takes a day.”



Another scene fragments Summer’s body similar to the way Truffaut fragments Catherine’s face. Here, the male lead only sees the parts of Summer that fit his fantasy; the visual style once again, belittles, dehumanizes, and restricts the female character by cutting her up into pieces on the screen.



Tom falls in love with Summer immediately, having barely spoken to her. Relatively soon, the two start dating and Tom now excels at his job because of her inspirational effect. However, Summer's character begins to deviate from the trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl as she forces Tom to acknowledge all aspects of her reality, not just the parts of her that he idealizes and fantasizes about. When Tom and Summer start to fight, he seems to think it's just one of her quirks, but in reality, she just isn't that into him. The idea that Summer has her own feelings and might not love him doesn't even seem to occur to Tom. Tom and Summer gradually grow apart. As a result, Tom becomes depressed and starts doing badly at work. When the two eventually break up, he can't remember what went wrong even though she was obviously unhappy and showed many signs of dissatisfaction, such as a comment she made about them being like Sid and Nancy. In a sense, this story follows the exact opposite trajectory from the muse/savior narrative because as the woman becomes her own fully realized character, the male character starts to deteriorate without his beautiful girl muse.

One of the scenes toward the end is perhaps the most striking in terms of distinguishing between the expectations of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl and the actual woman. When Tom shows up to Summer's party thinking they might rekindle their romance, we see them in split screen, one side is labeled expectations, the other reality. Such a technique physically removes and contrasts the male's fantasy from the couple's current situation.



Summer begins as an inspiration to the male lead, but she becomes a complex person with a background, who makes her own decisions about who she wants to be with. She becomes a character free from the fantasies and expectations of the male lead.

As I've previously suggested, both the older and newer film rely on and challenge the trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. Catherine and Summer fight to break out of the confines of their male-crafted muse role by acting out and doing what they

want, not what will help the male protagonists. They do not guide their men to safer and better shores. Looking at two films made half a century apart tells us how enduring and universal gender inequality has been even when packaged under different labels. Although the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope could seem feminist in the sense that the female characters act in a free-spirited way, this is misleading. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a product of post-feminism because of the superficial signifiers of progress and freedom such as having quirky and unique personalities and interests. The trope is also post-feminist because it liberates the women from their traditional mother or daughter roles but deprives them a full background. Both the separation of the character from her background/family and the characterization of quirky free-spiritedness distract the viewer from the very traditional and normative ideology these characters embody, especially in that these female characters are still playing the supporting role in the male leads' stories.

Because of the immense power of narrative film to influence how viewers perceive the world and their places within it, it is useful to establish that tropes such as the Manic Pixie Dream Girl are just that: character tropes. I believe that although *Jules et Jim* and *500 Days of Summer* were made in different parts of the world and during different time periods, they both tackle the age-old struggle to categorize and shape gender roles. Both films can be commended for reminding viewers that women are not trophies, they are not fairies that appear just when they're needed most, and they do not solely exist to inspire enlightenment for their male counterparts. It is also important to recognize that inequality between representation of male and female characters in film is often veiled by false signifiers such as a female character's worry-free temperament. Cinematic choices can create invisible biases and perspectives that maintain a level of powerlessness for female characters no matter how free spirited they are written to be. And the cinematic effect on viewer perception is worth considering when weighing social responsibility.

My hope is that young women do not strive to play a fragmented, constricted, supporting role in a man's life. In addition, men shouldn't expect this supporting role from women. I and many of my friends enjoy these films, which have lively roles for talented actresses. I think the reason many of us were attracted to these lackluster characters was that we could see ourselves in their little imperfections. The female characters, although in supporting roles, often aren't typical bombshells with unfaltering grace and finesse. Many times, they are less admired for overt sexual reasons and more for their unconventionality. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl may have seem like a welcome respite in terms of female characterization, but she is not the controller of her own destiny and she still relies on the male character to establish purpose in life. As an increasingly informed audience, and as future filmmakers, parents, aunts and uncles, we need to recognize these as popular fantasies and remember what these fantasies imply for the next generations who will, like us, be shaped by the stories around them.

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“That girl’s got it!” The unruly woman, romantic comedy, and sexual modernity

by [Claire Graman](#)

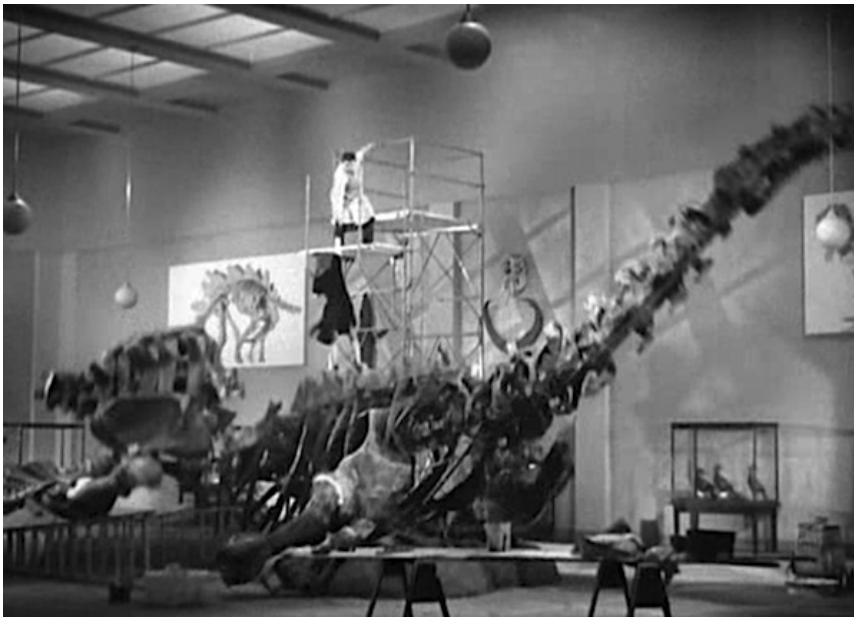
What happened before *It Happened One Night* (1934)? Contemporary scholars of the romantic comedy genre start their histories in the 1930s,[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) but the comic representation of love and sexuality in film can be found as early as Thomas Edison’s Vitascope film, *The May Irwin Kiss* (1896).



Love and laughter in *The May Irwin Kiss* (1896), featuring actors reenacting a scene from a popular stage comedy, *The Widow Jones*.

Film scholars generally explain the screwball comedy genre as cinema’s answer to rising divorce rates and changing gender roles in the wake of modernization and women’s suffrage (Mizejewski 34)[2], but why was screwball the answer? And why does the genre, which reached its height during the Great Depression, allow its heroines greater power to fulfill their desires than many of today’s rom-coms?

Compare *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), in which an unconventional woman convinces a serious man to have more fun, to the more recent *Trainwreck*(2015), in which a serious man convinces an unconventional woman to have less fun.



In the final scene of *Bringing Up Baby*, Susan (Katherine Hepburn, left) and paleontologist David (Cary Grant, right) reconcile when she apologizes for past conflict. In the process, she destroys his fossil, illustrating that she hasn't changed, but he forgives her anyway, proving he has.



In the final scene of *Trainwreck*, Amy (Amy Schumer, center) and Aaron (Bill Hader, not pictured) reconcile when she apologizes for past conflict and performs as a cheerleader (a profession she previously denigrated) to prove she's changed.

Trainwreck challenges gender roles by placing Amy Schumer in a role usually filled by a male “Brat Pack” character in a Judd Apatow film—that of the hedonistic 20-something whose path to love is paved with a growth in maturity. Showing that women can also enjoy casual sex and marijuana in a media landscape where even the most lauded television shows contain nagging wife tropes,[2] is certainly useful, but the film ends by containing this unruliness. Screwball comedies, by contrast, not only feature unruly women as a key element of the genre, but also uses their unruliness to fuel the jokes, the narratives, and the romantic relationships of these films. Though not entirely radical—happiness still must equal marriage—screwball creates a world driven by female desire and agency, safely couched but undeniably present in its zany humor.

The representation of female subjectivity in regards to love and sexuality in 1930s film is particularly significant in the wake of major historical shifts pertaining to gender, including suffrage, birth control, a shift from courtship to dating, and the entry of women in the workplace and public. If, as Miriam Hansen argues, classical Hollywood cinema can be read as vernacular modernism (mass culture’s response to modernization),[3] then I argue that by studying the unruly woman in

romantic comedies, we can better understand how society reconciled women's desire with sexual modernity, and how female actors and writers used performance, comedy, and genre to challenge gender roles.

To explore how the unruly woman shapes the evolution of the screwball comedy, I'll compare two films made a decade apart, but sharing many narrative and thematic similarities. The first is one of the best-known flapper comedies of the silent era, *It* (1927), starring Clara Bow and Antonio Moreno, based on a story by Elinor Glyn, an English writer known for her racy works during the Progressive Era. While Clara Bow's star text has led to rich scholarly analysis, this, her most famous film, is often dismissed for its unoriginal plot and overall silliness, particularly the writers' eagerness to reference to the film's title as often as possible. Yet this playful tone is precisely what allows for the heroine's radical desire and agency, while the shopgirl-marries-wealthy-boss plot taps into important cultural beliefs about gender and class. The second film, the screwball comedy *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936), is less well-known today, but it was well-received at its time, according to exhibitor reports[4] ("Theodora Goes Wild," "Theodora Goes Wild with..."), and starred two actors associated with the genre, Irene Dunne and Melvyn Douglas. Both films center on the way in which the unruly woman drives the comedy and romance of her film to critique gender, class, and propriety.

While there were many important comediennes of the 1920s,[5] Clara Bow and Colleen Moore confronted movie-goers with the new, vivacious womanhood of their flapper comedies. Both stars humorously performed the paradox of being simultaneously sexy and innocent, making modern femininity alluring but less threatening (Ross)[6]. Still, in their unruly performances and their characters' clearly articulated desires, they laid the foundation for the give-and-take gender wars of Depression-era romantic comedies.

In *It*, Bow plays a working-class department store employee with an almost-magical sex appeal (coily called 'it') who falls in love with the wealthy young owner of the store. *It* uses many elements that will later characterize screwball comedy, including the most obvious: witty, zany dialogue. We often don't remember intertitles for their wit, but as Laura Frost explains in her article on screenwriter, Anita Loos, written jokes in films became more common in the mid-1920s.[7] In *It*, intertitles with dialogue not only play with language for humorous effect, but also for characterization. For example, when Bow's character, Betty Lou, first sees the male lead Cyrus Waltham (Antonio Moreno), she says, "Sweet Santa Claus, give me *him*!"

The statement positions her as both a child (by referencing Santa Claus) and as an adult (by clearly articulating sexual desire). The joke playfully illustrates the cultural paradox that both infantilizes and sexualizes women, while positioning her as the desiring subject and the man as the object of desire. Similarly, in *Bringing up Baby*, when Katherine Hepburn's character, Susan, casually explains, in reference to Cary Grant's character, David: "I'm going to marry him. He doesn't know it yet, but I am." In both flapper and screwball comedy, the woman's desire is clearly articulated and typically propels the narrative.

Another significant element of *It*, which foreshadows screwball comedy, is role-playing. While this and mistaken identity appear frequently in comedy, as far back as Shakespeare, here Betty Lou pretends to be someone else specifically for the purpose of teasing her love interest. In this instance, she pretends to be an heiress in order to crash his yacht party, after the two have had an argument. This narrative turn not only allows for more jokes, as Betty Lou bluffs her way through class conventions (such as pretending to speak French), but also leads to the couple's ultimate reconciliation.

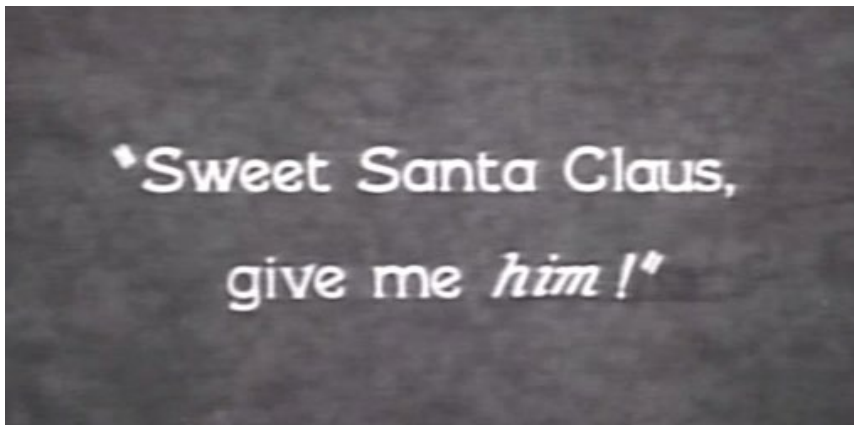


Working-class Betty Lou (Clara Bow) masquerades as a wealthy guest on her love interest's yacht.

Though this flapper comedy demonstrates several important characteristics of screwball comedy, such as an unruly heroine, zany dialogue, and role-playing, it lacks the crucial sense of partnership. Though the film makes it clear that Waltham returns Betty Lou's affections, this is never demonstrated through humor or play. Rather than showing a couple adjusting to each other via comedy, Betty Lou her man through her wit and charm. He does not have to work this way to earn her affection. Though Betty Lou fits into the unruly woman trope, and successfully follows her desire, she does not reshape social structures. The character is unique, not the narrative, a fact noted by contemporary reviewers (Hall).[8] We can find unruly women in many genres, but what is unique and important about screwball is that the unruly woman restructures the world of the film, through humor and in accordance to female desire. While flapper comedies, which presented unruly modern women with clear sexual desire, was an important precursor to the genre, the screwball comedies of the 1930s and early 1940s created more equality between the sexes through their zany comedy.

In keeping with the unruly aesthetic, *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936) has a convoluted plot, but otherwise echoes many elements of *It*, including a cross-class romance and social critique, humor through role-playing, and zany dialogue. The film follows, Theodora (Irene Dunne), a respectable woman from a small, conservative town called Lynnfield, who secretly writes a scandalous romance novel under the pseudonym, Caroline Adams. When she visits her publisher in the city, she meets Michael (Melvyn Douglas), the illustrator of her book's cover, who discovers her double life, is intrigued, and attempts to free her true self, the one that writes sexy novels. He follows her to Lynnfield and gets a job as a gardener for her maiden aunts.

In a pivotal scene, Michael and Theodora go berry-picking alone together, where they can both drop their masquerades. He questions her happiness, by asking about her ability to laugh in Lynnfield. Though his demeanor suggests arrogance, Theodora retains power both visually and through dialogue.



Theodora (Irene Dunne) and Michael (Melvyn Douglas) take a break from picking berries to debate the nature of happiness.

For most of this scene, the framing makes her seem taller and more serious than Michael who slouches and is covered in berry juice. She also calls him doctor, playfully undercutting his authority. Michael, however, plays along, pretending to take her pulse, which acknowledges her rebuke, but still asserts his viewpoint, that she is unhappy fitting in with society's expectations. The light-hearted tone and playfulness of this scene signals to the viewer the development of a companionate relationship between the couple while the dialogue retains the central conflict that will maintain the narrative.

Though Michael ultimately succeeds in shaking up Theodora's life, the dynamic switches halfway through the film and she follows him to the city to force him to acknowledge the unhappy aspect of his own life (specifically that he is trapped in a completely estranged marriage, because a divorce would hurt his father's political career). In the scene this screenshot depicts, Theodora fully embraces and parodies her persona as a flamboyant writer of racy novels, by not only colonizing Michael's apartment, but holding a press conference there in the most ridiculous of costumes, thus enacting a loving revenge/intervention for his interference in her life.



Theodora, as the scandalous authoress Caroline Adams, holds a press conference in Michael's apartment.

By the end of *Theodora Goes Wild*, our unruly heroine returns to Lynnfield, holding a friend's baby (through narrative contrivance), and basking in the perceived scandal of being an unmarried mother. Despite her unrepentance, she is greeted with a parade from the town and an apology from Michael.



Theodora returns to her home town, unmarried, with a baby. Unbeknownst to the shocked town, it is her friend's baby. Through comedy, the character can critique social conventions without actually breaking them, in keeping with the Hays Code.

As in Clara Bow's film, zany dialogue, role-playing, and an unruly heroine fuel the romance and comedy. But in contrast to *It*, *Theodora Goes Wild* provides a give and take between the romantic leads that is ultimately more fruitful in the growth of the characters, the plausibility of their relationship, and the depth of the social critique of gender roles.

In his broad analysis of comedy, Northup Frye argues that, unlike tragedy, comedy contains “an impulse towards renewal and social transformation” (44).[9] Feminist film critic Kathleen Karlyn expands on this theory to argue that “romantic comedy demands a place for women” (44[10] by giving the genre’s anti-authoritarian tendencies a feminist focus through unruliness. In screwball comedies, we see the realization of a newly shaped world that the unruly woman demands.

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Notes

1. See recent books by Kathrina Glitre, Leger Grindon, and Celestino Deleyto.
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2. See the character of Skyler in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013).
3. See Wagner, Kristen Anderson. "Pie Queen and Virtuous Vamps: The Funny Women of the Silent Screen." *A Companion to Film Comedy*. Edited by Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 39-60.
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6. Ross, Sara. "'Good Little Bad Girls': Controversy and the Flapper Comedienne." *Film History: An International Journal* 13.4 (2001): 409-23.
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Wonder women: women's tears, and why they matter

by [Kathleen Rowe Karlyn](#)

In memory of Chuck Kleinhans, 1942-2017



Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) flashes her magic bracelets and fearless gaze.

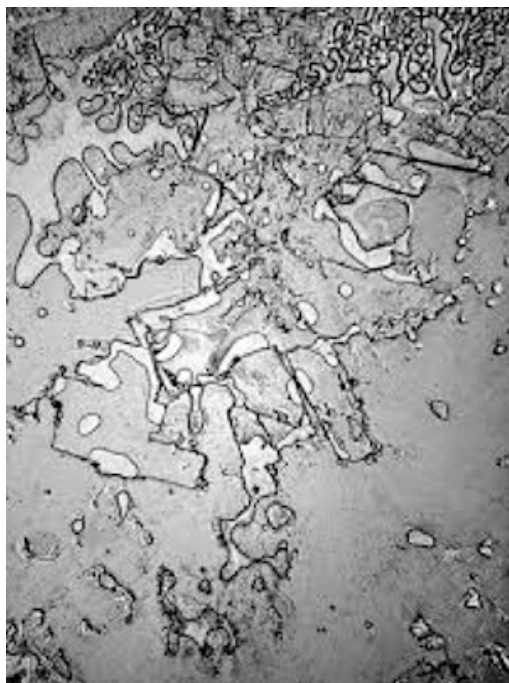
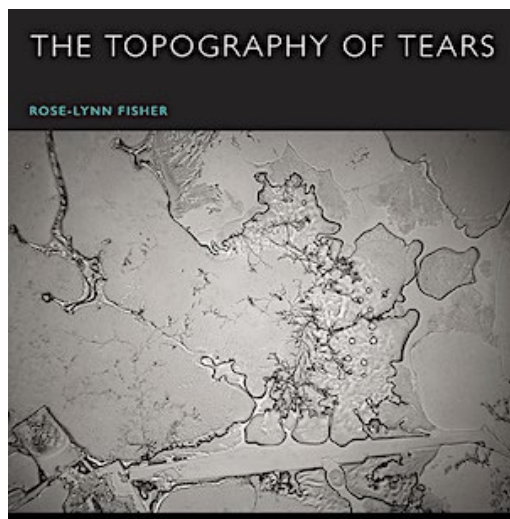
Monsters. Magic. The desire for purity but the reality of dirt. And tears.

Women engaged with popular and political culture have long ridden the waves of emotions associated with these images and themes, but that ride went into hyperdrive when Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton began their campaigns for the presidency in the summer of 2016.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) And while the battle between them technically ended with Clinton's defeat, it not only continued in Trump's post-election obsession with her but escalated in the massive mobilization of women and other minority groups newly politicized by the Trump presidency.

This paper didn't begin with Trump and Clinton, however, but with Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* released the following year. Women were crying about it in droves, and I wanted to know why. In the months that followed, I found more occasions for tears, from mass shootings that have become numbingly routine in the United States to the snarky responses to *What Happened*, Clinton's account of her run for the presidency, and finally in the #MeToo movement, which originated in 2007 with Tarana Black, a black activist from Philadelphia speaking out against rape culture. In the fall of 2017, when white female celebrities exposed film mogul Harvey Weinstein's decades of sexual abuse, the movement went global, toppling or at least tainting powerful men in virtually every institution of our society.



Hilary Rodham Clinton, first female major party candidate for U.S. President.



I've always been interested in cultural figures and texts that move people or push their buttons, especially those associated with female unruliness, a cluster of attributes that can both celebrate and demonize female power. In the late 1980s and 1990s, comedian Roseanne polarized audiences of her standup shows and her sitcom (ABC 1988-1997) with her unvarnished feminist perspective on working class life. By the mid-1990s, *Girl Culture* and the popularity among girls of such media texts as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Scream* (1996) and *Titanic* (1997) exposed generational tensions within feminism. At the same time, highly acclaimed films such as *American Beauty* (1999) gave voice to male resentment of the gains women had made since the Women's Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

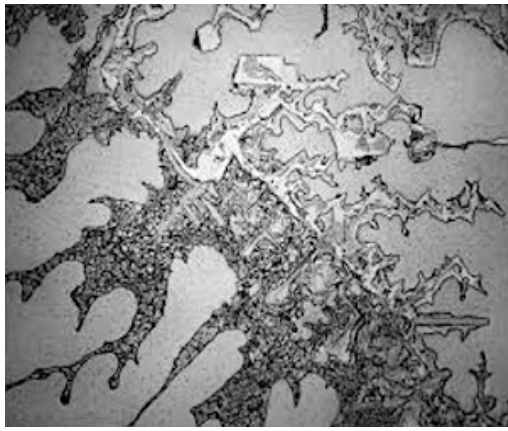
In the past year, two female figures, one real, one fictional, have provoked similarly intense responses: Diana of Themyscira, AKA Wonder Woman, and Clinton. If Clinton's defeat was a shock, so too was *Wonder Woman's* triumph—at the box office, among critics, and with female audiences around the world. Women have wept about Clinton too, and while those tears are of a different nature than the ones triggered by *Wonder Woman*, the phenomena are related, as is the emotion driving the #MeToo revelations, certainly displaced from its more intractable target in the White House.

My thoughts about these emotions have been influenced by two conversations I've had many times in this past year. In discussing the election with friends, especially men, I've often felt that I hit an impossible and depressing wall. And most of my conversations about *Wonder Woman* left me feeling a bit wistful, wanting to share my uncomplicated delight in the film as much as my simmering anger about the narratives that have taken root in our culture around Clinton. In all of these conversations, I've sensed ambivalence and the desire for "more." "Why couldn't *Wonder Woman* be more feminist?" Or, in a *New Yorker* film review by scholar Jill Lepore, "I am not proud that I found comfort in watching a woman in a golden tiara and thigh-high boots clobber hordes of terrible men. But I did." Regarding Clinton, "Why did she accept money to talk to Goldman Sachs?" "Why didn't she tell off Trump when he stalked her on stage?" "Why did she stay with Bill?"

This desire for more reveals a deeper yearning for purity and a frustration with the reality of compromise that confronts anyone—but especially a woman—who aspires to direct a blockbuster film or to rise to a pinnacle of political power—in other words, to be unruly, to act in a big way on her desire. The burden is heavy, the judgments harsh, and the risks very real for any woman who is a first, and for all who refuse to play by the rules.

In my earlier work, I was drawn more to women's laughter than to their tears. Tears and melodrama felt too close to women's suffering and victimization. And in these days of cynicism and despair, I have felt saved more than ever by comedy and laughter. *Saturday Night Live*, John Oliver, and Samantha Bee, whose feminist rage is positively cathartic. But this has also been a time of tears for me.

Like the old bromide about Eskimos and snow, there are many kinds of tears, which vary significantly depending on their origins: emotional tears versus tears from cutting onions, tears of physical versus emotional pain, of joy, relief, and so on. In her poetic book *The Topography of Tears*, RoseLynn Fisher magnifies tears under a microscope then photographs them. These tears are mostly her own, and she shed them on different occasions: "Yes." "My brother's tears on the other side



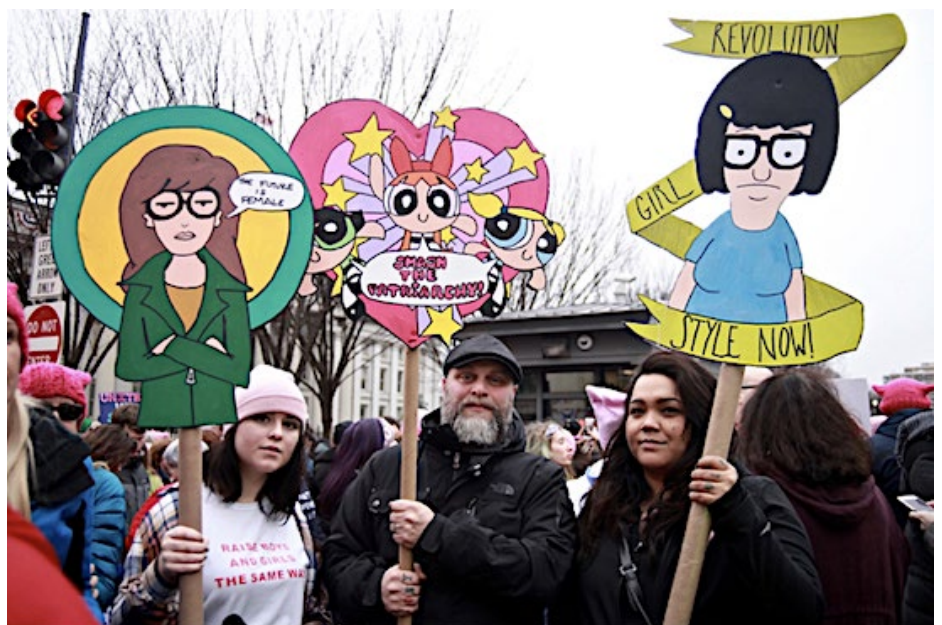
Photographs of tears by RoseLynn Fisher.

of a promise kept.” “Last tear I ever cry for you.” As photographic images, they evoke complex geological landscapes that suggest the connections between micro and macro, body and soul, just as women’s tears, whether triggered by *Wonder Woman*, Trump or the shared trauma of sexual abuse, suggest more emotion than our bodies can contain or our words convey.

One recent instance when I felt emotion I could not contain was on the day after Trump’s inauguration, when I joined caravans of buses filled with women converging on the nation’s capital for an exhilarating mixture of political activism and street theater. There were problems with the march—problems about racial and class privilege that persist within feminism—but they didn’t derail the sensations of sanity and solidarity I felt in a world that had seemingly gone cuckoo.



The Women's March, a mix of political activism and carnival.



Carnavalesque street theater at the Women's March.

Tears ambushed me again, months later, when I sat in a theater and watched *Wonder Woman*. As film scholars, we know the power of a shared audience, a big screen and great sound system to amplify the impact of a film, but I was not prepared to be so moved by the giant image of a gorgeous, fearless woman ripping up the screen. Two moments especially thrilled me: in the first, Diana as a little girl takes a warrior pose that shows her fighting spirit and determination to have her way. In the second, as an adult, she again defies those who would oppose her and storms across No Man's Land, warding off a barrage of bullets with her magic bracelets.

Finally, when Clinton emerged from her post-election retreat to promote her new book and was told, in effect, to shut up and go away, I did not weep. But I felt the smoldering rage that women have long suppressed when faced with assaults on their dignity, let alone their bodies, as testified to by the millions of women finally sharing their stories of sexual abuse and trauma.

I'm not interested in mounting a defense of either *Wonder Woman* the film or Clinton the person. Clinton is not a radical, and she has taken positions throughout her long career I have not agreed with, although I am sympathetic to the reasons why. Nor is *Wonder Woman* a perfect feminist film, as if such a thing existed. But I am interested in how the strong and ambivalent responses both have triggered are tied to the conventions of female unruliness I first explored earlier in my career.

Wonder Woman's unruliness is tempered because it comes in the form of a fictionalized character packaged for a mass audience. Clinton's is more threatening because she has sought and held real power in the real world; moreover, because she is long past the age of a woman's perceived "fuck-ability," she is coded even more strongly with taboo and the grotesque. But both push at cultural beliefs about what a woman can do or be. Both ask us to consider what it takes for a woman to have power today. Just as "sadism demands a story," in Laura Mulvey's still provocative words, both remind us that choosing action over passivity, the preferred mode of femininity, may require a willingness to compromise, to get one's hands dirty and even engage with violence. It is hard to imagine Buffy defending the world from vampires without being willing to slay them herself. Both *Wonder Woman* and Clinton ask us to consider what narrative genres are available to tell the stories of women who combine action and power. Can we still imagine these women only as superheroes or monsters, in the realm of fantasy?



Geraldine Ferraro making history with Walter Mondale.

I've long admired Latina actor America Ferrera for her performances in Patricia Cardoso's *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) and ABC's *Ugly Betty* (2006-10), and my admiration has only grown after her recent interview with Clinton in the *New York Times* (Sept 16, 2017):

"As a woman, as a Latina, I've always felt there's a *very narrow version* of me that's acceptable, that's allowed to succeed. And if I stray from that, I'm not just failing myself, I'm failing to many. So I've operated from a place of *fear*, not from *my most-alive self*" (my emphasis).

Ferrera identifies here an array of emotions activated by both *Wonder Woman* and Clinton: the frustration of having to shrink ourselves into narrow versions of who we are in order to be successful; the fear, shame and even violence we risk if we violate the constraints imposed on us; the sense of responsibility to others



Ferraro's significance noted and promoted.

when we do aspire to do or be something more, a theme that HRC returns to repeatedly in her book; and finally the buried yearning to be our “most alive” selves, something many women are experiencing now, some for the first time, through the power of cinematic identification with a narrative and character they have never experienced before.[2]

In 1984, I experienced something similar when I was forced to confront emotions I had not yet dealt with, about a reality I had not yet fully perceived. I was working as an editor at a Kansas newspaper, and one day I joined the staff in the newsroom to watch Geraldine Ferraro accept the nomination to run as candidate for Vice President. I saw a lone woman on the dais surrounded by men, and tears filled my eyes. At that point in my life, I was reading *MS* magazine and I supported the ERA, but I hadn't yet fully grasped the extent of how my imagination, my sense of possibility and my life itself had been colonized by patriarchy.



Ferraro's persona constructed to combine patriotism, femininity and strength.

Like Clinton, Ferraro was smart, accomplished, and experienced in politics, and her candidacy recognized for the milestone it was. Yet in short order, investigations into her husband's business revealed shady dealings and, corrupted by association, she had to step down. In doing so, she anticipated Clinton's battle throughout her public life to be a person in her own right, as well the ways she has suffered guilt by association with her husband. Her identity has often been submerged into an entity known as “The Clintons,” a term heavy with distaste.



Anita Hill's strength and poise during hostile

Similar moments followed in the years to come: hearing a woman's voice—Susan Stamberg's—for the first time on a radio newscast; catching a glimpse of a female pilot in the cockpit of a huge aircraft; and then in 1991, being riveted to the radio for Anita Hill's testimony before the Senate, her courage paving the way for the waves of women now naming their abusers and holding them accountable. Even earlier, there had been Shirley Chisholm breaking boundaries of race and gender, paving the way for Ferraro and Hill.[3] But it was seeing Ferraro on that TV screen that jolted me into recognizing what had been missing in my universe.

questioning by male Senators.



Whoopi Goldberg as Celie in *The Color Purple* (1985).



Seeing Celie's image on the big screen moved the film's black female viewers.

The shared history of moments like these, and others, helps explain the connection many women of my generation feel with Clinton, and because she is a real person it is easy to see why her story matters. It has been more difficult to make that case about Wonder Woman for people who don't study popular culture, despite her being the most popular female comic-book hero of all time. But her story matters too. With Jenkins' film, Wonder Woman was finally featured in a live-action feature of her own, which broke records of all kinds and moved legions of women.

Feminists and critics on the left have long been suspicious of media texts that are popular, seeing them as inevitably contaminated by dominant ideologies. As a result, they have failed at times to take seriously the experiences of real rather than theoretical audiences and have minimized both the utopian value of pleasure and the political value of the imagination.

My thoughts about *Wonder Woman* are inspired by Jacqueline Bobo's work on Black women's responses to Spielberg's film *The Color Purple* in *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995). Fully aware of its racist distortions of Alice Walker's novel and of the shortcomings identified by critics in general and Black men in particular, Black women loved the film anyway. They loved seeing Whoopi Goldberg's face on the big screen and identifying with a Black woman at the center of her own story. Bobo's respect for these women recalls B. Ruby Rich's reminder, during the heyday of Mulvey's abstracted female spectator, not to forget the real women sitting next to us in a theater.

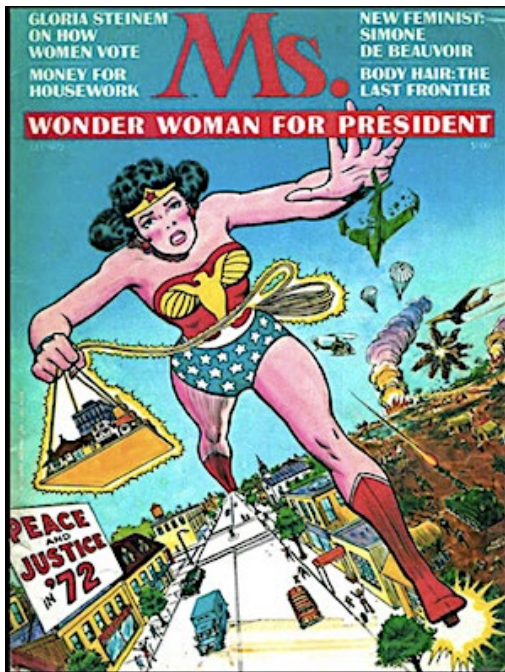
Something like that emotion occurred in screenings of Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*, which like Spielberg's *Color Purple* makes full use of cinema's potential for spectacle and storytelling to give women something they've craved, often without even realizing it. And it is happening again for Black audiences watching Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018), another superhero film that smashed records when it opened and earned similar praise from critics and viewers.

According to Lepore's *The Second History of Wonder Woman*, Wonder Woman has been a feminist icon since her creation in 1941 by William W. Marston, a psychologist best known for inventing the lie detector although notorious for his controversial beliefs about polyamory and women's superiority to men. (Angela Robinson creates a sympathetic portrait of him in her film *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* [2017].) Inspired by Margaret Sanger and other feminist heroes of the 20th century, Marston designed Wonder Woman as a female counter to ultra-violent male superheroes. Adorned with chains, leather and cuffs, she prompted efforts by conservative cultural groups to censor her, despite the association of chains with the women's suffrage movement. She was also accused of "inciting indecency" in hearings on juvenile delinquency by members of Congress concerned that Themyscira, Wonder Woman's utopian all-female home, promoted lesbianism.

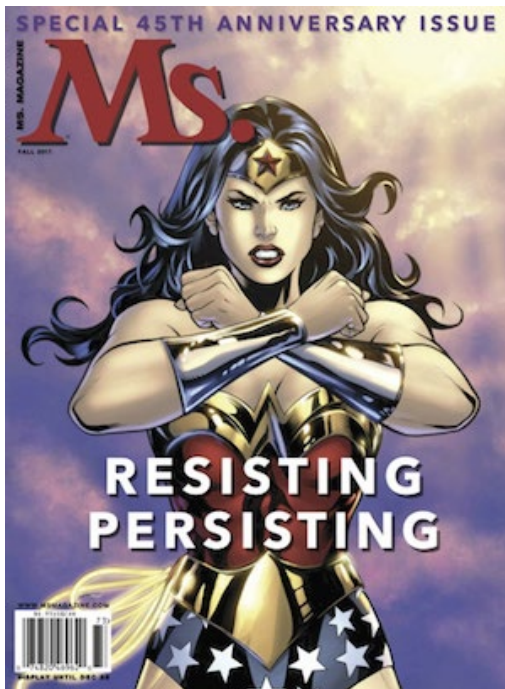
These ambivalent and charged responses to Wonder Woman can be explained by her ties with female unruliness, a tradition in representation and real life that includes some or all of the following:

- The unruly woman refuses to submit or defer to men.
- Her body is excessive and often fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.
- Her speech is excessive in quantity, content or tone.
- She makes jokes about men, and uses laughter to unite women.
- Often androgynous, she draws attention to social construction of gender.

Associated with dirt, liminality and taboo, she is a figure of ambivalence rooted in



Inaugural issue of *Ms.* in 1972, anticipating a female candidate for President.



Forty-five years later, Wonder Woman is still a powerful feminist icon.

the grotesque and the carnivalesque. She may be old or a masculinized crone, for an old woman who refuses to become silent and invisible in our culture is often considered grotesque. (This element is central to the gendered demonization of Clinton as she has aged, a point I will return to later). Finally the unruly woman can be seen as prototype of woman as subject, transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire. These tropes are coded with misogyny. But a woman who embraces and recodes them can tap into their potential to disrupt the existing social order.

Wonder Woman's origin story places her outside that order from the beginning. Diana is born on the utopian island of Themyscira, protected by the gods and inhabited only by women who train as warriors but live in peace. In Jenkins' version of the story, Steve Trevor, an U.S. pilot, falls out of the sky into the sea close to Themyscira. Diana, who knows she has unusual powers but not yet how many or why, defies her protective mother and leaves with him to save the world from the ravages of the Great War. In the process, she experiences sex, discovers ice cream, and acquires some fabulous new clothes. She also learns who she is—the half-sister of her sworn enemy, Ares, the god of war. In effect, she journeys from the innocence of her life on Themyscira to experience in the world of men.

Other versions of female superheroes have also drawn large followings among girls and women and interest from feminist critics, although I am less interested in the histories and mythologies of the vast world of superheroes than in what's behind the impact of Jenkins' film. Before this film, the most famous cinematic or televisual version of Wonder Woman was Lynda Carter's TV series (1975-79), notable for its heavy nationalism and campy tone created by such tongue-in-cheek props as an "invisible" airplane.[4] Lara Croft, Cat Woman, Wonder Girl and Superwoman, fantasy-based superheroes from comics, are also defined by their super powers and willingness to use them, a quality excluded from normative femininity. Like male superheroes with their exaggerated signs of masculinity, these female superheroes are hyper-female in their appearance and usually, like Lynda Carter and Gal Gadot in Jenkins' film, beautiful.

Several of these female super heroes are "noir-ish" characters who inhabit decidedly dark worlds. Xena in *Xena Warrior Princess*, an Australian TV series (1995-2001), is a more flawed figure than Wonder Woman, having started as a villain. She enjoys combat for its own sake and has some magical powers, and with her female sidekick Gabrielle, brings a strong lesbian component to the show. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) originated as a film and became a cult favorite among teen girls and some boys. According to the Buffy mythology, in each generation a girl is chosen to save the world from evil and given the power to do so. This destiny compounds Buffy's adolescent angst because it cuts her off



Lynda Carter's *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979), linking her power to national identity.

from the normal pleasures of teen girl's life. The protagonist of *Jessica Jones* (2015-), a TV show based on a Marvel super hero, suffers PTSD and self-medicates with alcohol after having suffered extreme psychological and sexual violence at the hands of her nemesis, an evil male superhero with powers of mind control.

In contrast, *Wonder Woman* begins with a voice-over of Diana testifying to the wondrous beauty of the world. She discovers its corruption but she is no one's victim. The optimism of her vision and her ability to sustain it in the face of monstrous evil is an important factor in the film's power to move audiences suffering from the widespread malaise and cynicism of this historical moment, not only in the United States but globally.



Xena Warrior Princess (1995-2001), embracing love between women. [top left]

Jessica Jones (2015, 2018), with its tormented *noir* female superhero. [top right]

For male authors, exceptional power often brings suffering to female characters, as in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). [left]

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Charlize Theron in *Monster*.

Other factors set Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* apart from her super sisters. In terms of production, she is the only one who appears in a film directed by a woman, and that film had the largest budget, highest grosses, and biggest opening weekend of any live-action film ever directed by a woman. Within months, it had earned \$820.4 million in global box office (\$409 million domestic) and became the seventh highest grossing film of 2017.

The meaning of this becomes clearer in the context of the shocking absence of female directors in the U.S. film industry. According to *Variety* (January 2017 "Number of Female Directors Falls Despite Diversity Debate"), women comprised seven per cent of all directors working on 250 top-grossing domestic films in 2016, a decline of two percentage points from 2015 and 1998, despite two years of public debate about the lack of opportunities for women and people of color in the industry. *Variety*'s figures predate *Wonder Woman* and the mobilization of powerful women in the entertainment industry following the Weinstein revelations, but it remains to be seen how long it will take to truly change this culture of deeply entrenched sexism.

Because of that culture, Jenkins had to be something of a superhero herself to direct this film. In 2003, she directed *Monster* based on the life of Eileen Wuornos. By managing to generate understanding for a female serial killer of men, she showed not only her skills as a director but also a feminism canny enough to reach wide audiences. Yet even though the film won critical raves and an Oscar for Charlize Theron, Jenkins went thirteen years before directing another feature film. She now has a contract to direct *Wonder Woman 2*, for \$7 to 9 million, the highest salary ever for a female director, but her career shows how there is no established path in Hollywood for a talented female director even after the kind of early success that would propel a man's career forward.

Wonder Woman's critical reception was overwhelmingly positive, with critics generally "swooning," "freaking out" and "going gaga" over the film. For me, the most interesting response was some variation of Meredith Woerner's comments in the *LA Times* ("Why I Cried Through the Fight Scenes in *Wonder Woman*"), which I read repeatedly in reviews and comments on the film by women:

"I felt like I was discovering something I didn't even know I had always wanted, after three decades of watching Iron Man, Captain America, Superman, and Batman punching others in face."

Many agreed that the prolonged battle at the end of *Wonder Woman* was too long and that some of the dialogue and music uninspired, but most echoed Jill Lepore, the historian and author of *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, writing in *The New Yorker*:

"A lot of viewers will come to this film, as I did, after the most ordinary of days, punch-card-punching, office-meeting, kid-raising, news-watching days, days of seeing women being silenced, ignored, dismissed, threatened, undermined, underpaid, and underestimated, and, somehow, taking it."

Fewer women may be "taking it" since the #MeToo movement, but most women can relate to Lepore's description of what she brought to the theater when she saw *Wonder Woman*. And it hasn't been only women who have been moved to tears



Linda Hamilton in *Terminator*.

by the film. Joshua Johnson, host of NPR's "1-A," told his listeners that he too wept when he heard Wonder Woman explain that she was motivated not by what people (e.g. world of men) deserve but by what she believes in, and she believes in love.

Not everyone shared that enthusiasm, though. James Cameron, the well-respected director of the *Terminator*, *Alien* and *Avatar* films as well *Titanic* and other action-packed blockbusters, jumped in with a textbook case of mansplaining:

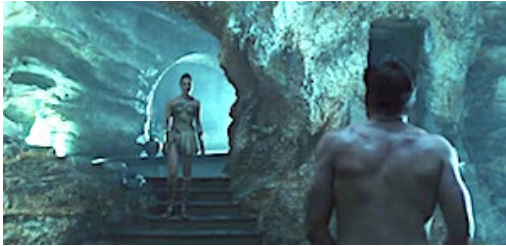
"The self-congratulatory back-patting Hollywood's been doing over *Wonder Woman* has been so misguided. *Wonder Woman* is a step backward... because the character was wearing kind of a bustier costume that was very form-fitting. She's absolutely drop-dead gorgeous. To me, that's not breaking new ground."

He contrasts her with the character Sarah Connor (played by Linda Hamilton) in his *Terminator* films:

"She was not a beauty icon. She was strong, she was troubled, she was a terrible mother and she earned the respect of the audience through pure grit. There was nothing sexual about her character. It was about angst, it was about will, it was about determination. She was crazy, she was complicated."

Not surprisingly, these comments did not please influential women in the entertainment industry. In a testy on-line exchange, Lynda Carter called him "thuggish," and an Australian comic book artist urged him to "calm down." And with good reason, because Cameron's critique missed the mark in so many ways. For her, despite her pleasure in Gadot's beauty, Jenkins did not shoot the film with lighting, camera angles and point of view shots designed to please the male

gaze. Instead she playfully reverses the gaze, as when a clothed Wonder Woman sees then studies Steve Trevor naked in a steamy pool. Lindy Hemming, who designed Wonder Woman's costume, "reverse engineered" the conventions already associated with the character into attire more in keeping with what Amazonian warriors might actually have worn. The difference from Lynda Carter's skimpy and revealing costuming is striking, not only in how the muted colors avoid the nationalistic red white and blue Carter wore but in how their hard surfaces don't cling to Gadot's body.



The female gaze in *Wonder Woman*.

More important, Connor assumed that a character's appearance—in this case, her beauty—disqualifies her as an icon of female empowerment, which in his view should be complicated and crazy, perhaps more like the wounded and tormented Jessica Jones. And a bad mother? Even better, because Hollywood does not know how to create a good one. Sarah Connor may be compelling, but she is also one man's fantasy of a strong woman. Above all, Cameron is wrong in assuming that he knows more than women do about what they want and what's good for them.

Still, and not surprisingly, the film has evoked mixed responses from female viewers who identify as feminists. Here are some typical comments from casual conversations: "I don't like fantasy." "Why did a man (Steve) have to instruct her?" "Why did she have to be so sexualized, with bare legs and a sexy costume?" "Gal Gadot is a Zionist." "How can a feminist hero be so violent?" "The film is too western and too white." And finally, "I just wanted it to be more feminist."

To begin with the last comment, feminism is too complex and multifaceted to be reduced to one set of orthodox standards. The burden of representation placed on this director and this film are similar to what directors of color, queer directors and others from underrepresented groups have had to face when they have achieved breakthroughs of their own. The more important question concerns where a film such as *Wonder Woman* succeeds in breaking new ground, and where it falls short.



Casting Gal Gadot, both successful and problematic.

The most consistent complaint from feminist critics has concerned the film's lack of intersectionality, or its failure to integrate a full range of identities into its analysis of gender. Theresa Harold ("Why *Wonder Woman* Isn't the Feminist Fantasy We've Been Told It Is (Metro UK, June 24, 2017) quotes a Twitter user as follows: 'Wonder Woman [the character as played in the film] is a thin, white, cis-gender, able-bodied Zionist. No way in hell I'm watching that ish [sic]'. As this comment suggests, casting the Israeli Gadot was almost universally praised on artistic grounds, but controversial on political grounds. Similarly, from Cameron Glover in "Why *Wonder Woman* is Bittersweet for Black Women (Harpers Bazaar, June 9, 2017),

"The film embraced feminism for a very specific community—one that does not have people like me in mind."

While Gadot is ethnically ambiguous and her accent makes her a more global figure than blue-eyed Lynda Carter, she is ultimately coded as white. Women of color appear mainly in Themyscira and in minor roles that include Diana's nurse, an unfortunate choice that calls to mind the mammy stereotype. The film also erases the sexual dimension of the sisterhood celebrated on Themyscira and the lesbianism long associated with the character.

These concerns beg several questions: Where should a director draw the line

when seeking to achieve her artistic vision? #MeToo has raised similar questions about relations between acclaimed works of art and their creators, whose personal behavior may have been abhorrent.[5] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) And how faithful should a movie be to its source material? Jenkins took license with hers, most significantly in shifting the setting from the 2nd to the 1st World War because she wanted Diana to confront evil in a context that was more morally ambiguous than the later war. She also wanted a PG rating for the film so it could be viewed by children, a decision that may explain its restrained treatment of sex and its avoidance of anything that could be read as queer.

Viewers who fault the film for its lack of realism raise an interesting question for feminist critics because realism offers such limited roles for women. In contrast, fantasy, with its dimensions of allegory, can reach deep into myth and far into the realm of the imagination. Genre films, which are highly conventionalized, also offer opportunities for skillful directors to subvert dominant ideologies.

Jenkins draws on two genres in *Wonder Woman* —the superhero film and romantic comedy. Accepting genre conventions would have helped viewers such as Lepore to more easily tolerate and perhaps even enjoy elements of the film, such as Diana's thigh-high boots and golden tiara, that in another genre would be silly. In the past, feminist critics have been troubled by female characters who have used violence, even when defending themselves and avenging violence inflicted on them and others, typically by men (as in the *Scream* slasher films). Yet the scenes most often mentioned as thrilling to *Wonder Woman*'s female audiences are ones in which the women of Themyscira show their warrior skills and Diana herself fiercely battles her enemies.

Here the conventions of the superhero film *require* Diana to take on and then discard the “narrow” femininity Ferrera identified, which she wears literally as a disguise in London. The “action” in action or superhero films refuses the ideal of passivity associated with normative femininity, even if to take action means to risk getting one's hands dirty, especially in a non-utopian world. Some of Clinton's potential supporters have given her little room for compromise as she has navigated that reality throughout her lifetime of service in the public eye.

Jenkins also uses romantic comedy, which often pairs an unruly woman with an attractive man and then heightens dramatic (and sexual) tension by showing them covering up their attraction to each other with verbal banter and jousting. In using this genre, Jenkins offered her female audiences a genre they enjoy, and countered the bleakness typical of the superhero genre with lightness and wit. This tone was often cited by critics as central to the film's success, and I suspect I was not alone in appreciating its idealism in a cynical time. Jenkins is very clear in interviews that she wanted a character who was sincere, not ironic; vulnerable; capable of growth; and motivated by love—in other words, relatable for many women. The director's view of art, too, is direct and unpretentious: “Art is supposed to bring beauty to the world.” (Cara Buckley *Times*).



The inheritance of romantic comedy.

After feminism's Second Wave, the issue of femininity became a wedge between older feminists critical of its constraints and younger women who felt they could enjoy its pleasures without compromising their politics. Unlike Cameron's Sarah Connor or Ripley in *Alien*, Diana offers a rare combination of physical strength and femininity. Like popular culture at its most subversive best, *Wonder Woman* lets women have it both ways. Diana discovers that she likes babies, pretty clothes, and that hunky Steve Trevor. But she never defers to him, or anyone. Nor does she lose her power when she loses her virginity, a trope that goes back to the chaste warrior Diana of antiquity (and that *Scream* famously upended).

When femininity is re-imagined, so is masculinity. By reversing the gaze to female, Jenkins not only allows female audiences to enjoy beautiful women in action but also a handsome man—Chris Pine—as a naked object of desire. The film is generous to men in other ways too. After guiding Diana into the world of men, Steve becomes an old-fashioned hero himself in a spectacular act of self-sacrifice, conveniently eliminating the necessity of romantic comedy's generic ending, the woman's domestication at the altar. Diana will always have the photograph that opens and closes the film and the memories it recalls, but Steve's death leaves her free to pursue her mission as a Single Wonder Woman.

A few weeks after I saw *Wonder Woman*, Clinton released her new book *What Happened*, her account of her campaign for the presidency. Even after the grotesque attacks Michelle Obama had endured from the nastiest corners of the Internet and that Clinton too had suffered throughout her public life, I was not prepared for the dismissal and condescension of commentators in mainstream publications:

Michelle Ruiz (*Vogue*) gathered a few the day before the book was published: "Democrats are 'dreading' Clinton's book tour, and saying the attention around *What Happened* is being met with a 'collective groan.' 'They're mad she's looking backward; ... 're-litigating' the election,'" from Ruth Marcus, the Pulitzer Prize-nominated columnist from *Washington Post* ("Hillary Clinton, smash your rearview mirror," June 2, 2017). Marcus goes on to say that Clinton's failure to "go gently" is hurting the Democratic party. Pundits from both parties expressed anger that she's assigning blame, including Bernie Sanders, who belittled her (on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*) as "a little bit silly" to keep talking about it.

At the same time, Ruiz cites *Salon's* depiction of Sanders

"as ever, the noble one, with his 'forward-thinking guide for the young,' going so as far as to note that, 'If anyone should be writing a 'what happened' memoir, it is Sanders, not Clinton.'"

Salon also accused her of "playing the women card again" when she said some people are more skeptical of people who don't look like everyone else who has been President. From the *Washington Post*: "Publicly calling out misogyny is probably not the best strategy for combating it, or for encouraging other women





Grotesque images of Clinton and the Obamas. Racism drove voters to Trump. Sexism drove them away from Clinton.



Unruliness compounded by age. The mouth implies the danger of unruly female desire and speech



Powerful women threaten the boundary between male and female.

to run for office.” Meanwhile “Clinton is ‘naming names, bristling at her unfair loss and cashing in.’” Of course, Obama, McCain, Biden, Gore and Romney all earned comparable fees for their books.

Meanwhile, with a few exceptions, Clinton’s defenders were too tepid and too few. Smart, left-leaning women demurred—“She’s too corrupt, she’s too old, I just don’t like her,” and I questioned my own reticence to speak more strongly in her defense. Was it just battle fatigue? Or had I also absorbed by osmosis the unrelenting personal and political case made against her by people and institutions that I trusted? Women can be the harshest critics of other women whose decisions and actions cause them to question their own, and many women more easily identify with a male savior—on the left or the right—than with a woman loaded with the ambivalence of a mother figure. It is sobering to confront the fact that 53 percent of white women voted for a man who takes pleasure in humiliating and violating women, and that the term “machine feminism” has entered the popular discourse.

The most obvious explanation for Clinton’s defeat is that this country just does not like ambitious women. Plain and simple. In those difficult post-election conversations I referred to earlier, two elephants loomed in the room, tied to the two most recurring chants at Trump’s rallies: Build a wall and lock her up. Race and gender. Of course, race, gender and class are connected—but how and why did class preempt both race and gender in the vast majority of postmortems of the election, which held that Democrats lost because Clinton failed to connect with the working class? [6]

The scapegoating of Clinton enabled Democrats to dodge the deeper currents of sexism and racism, or at least unacknowledged white privilege, that persist across the political spectrum. Racism drove voters to Trump. Sexism drove them away from Clinton. The sexism Clinton dealt with was compounded by her unruliness, and her unruliness compounded by her age.

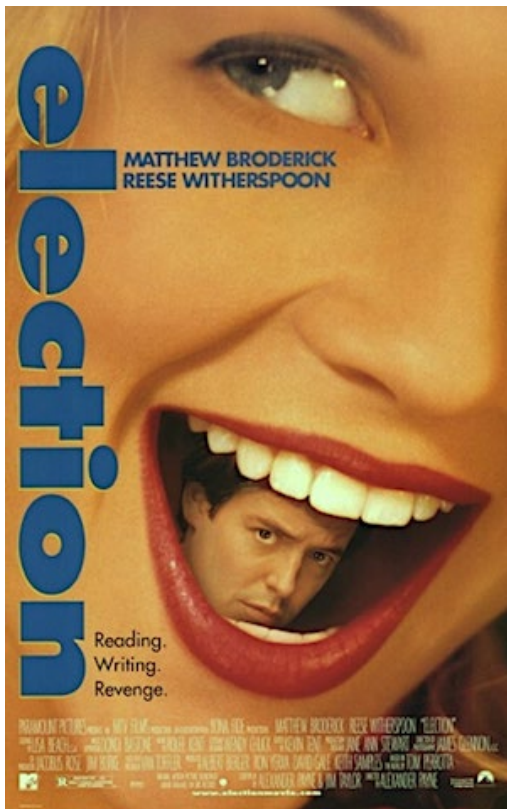
My first inkling of this analysis came from Dave Chappelle on *Saturday Night Live* when he called out white Democrats for their panic and shock at experiencing for the first time the sense of alienation from the political system that minorities know only too well. Then this summer, Mehdi Hassan published an article in *Intercept* entitled “Top Democrats are Wrong: Trump supporters more motivated by racism than economic issues” (April 6, 2017). I discovered the article when a former student posted it on Facebook, framed with an expression of his own frustration as a black man trying to make the same case for months with his white friends, most of them progressive and many “stone cold brilliant,” in his words.[7]

Within a few months, TaNehisi Coates elaborated on Hassan’s argument with a compelling and erudite article in *The Atlantic* (October 2017) (“America’s First White President”), followed by Adam Serwer in November on the role of white privilege in the post-election analysis by progressive elites, also in the *Atlantic* (“The Nationalists Delusion”). Yet even as the dust begins to settle, dislodging or at least complicating that class-based explanation has continued to prove elusive (*Times* op ed Oct 22). It has been easier for young white progressives to line up behind single-issue Bernie Sanders than behind Black Lives Matter, for example, because of that elephant in the room—unacknowledged white privilege—which continues to bedevil not only feminism but also the left. As Serwer argues,

“To acknowledge the centrality of racial inequality to American democracy is to question its legitimacy—so it must be denied.”



The former firebrand at Wellesley College became a narrow version of her unruly self as she supported her husband's political career.



The female mouth is again depicted as threatening on the cover of the *Election* (1999) DVD. Reese Witherspoon played a “Hillary in the making,” despised by everyone.

At the same time, Sanders’ supporters agreed that yes, of course, sexism played a role in Trump’s win, and they denounced the most virulently misogynist attacks on Clinton, but they still can’t get over hating and blaming her. As one observer noted, Clinton was hectored throughout her campaign by two old white men, one on the right and the other on the left.

A cool-headed comparison of Clinton and Sanders’ platforms shows how close their positions were on most issues. But Sanders managed to turn Clinton’s decades of experience and achievements into a liability while erasing the implications of his own minimal record during his quarter of a century in the Congress. According to Susan Bordo, in an especially insightful analysis, Sanders also succeeded in re-branding “progressive” to make the demands of women and minorities seem somehow old-fashioned, especially to young feminists who knew Clinton only through the lens of a media assault on her that has lasted for decades (*Guardian* April 2 1017 “The Destruction of Hillary Clinton: Sexism, Sanders and the millennial feminists”).

This assault began with Clinton’s identification as an unruly woman decades ago and with the complicated and powerful set of emotions that identification triggered. There’s no need to review here the ways Clinton, the former firebrand at Wellesley College, has been pressured most of her life to live a “very narrow version” of her unruly self, especially once she hitched her fate to Bill’s. As a culture, we have barely been able to imagine a private partnership between a man and woman in which each is free to publically pursue their own ambitions. As a textbook example of unruliness throughout her life, she has been criticized for being threatening, unfeminine, “unlikeable.” Her laughter has unsettled reporters for being too much, too robust; her voice too shrill or unpleasant; and her pantsuits and changing hairstyles mocked. Targeting these superficialities, of course, displaced the real source of her danger: her braininess and her drive. Ambition is distasteful in a woman, and unapologetic ambition particularly threatening.

The sexism and misogyny Clinton has always triggered intensified in her presidential campaign, when she tapped into the additional disruptive power available to a woman as she ages. When a woman refuses to acquiesce gracefully to silence and invisibility after menopause, she becomes threatening and monstrous. Think Nancy Pelosi, who has been subject to simmering resentment for her refusal to step aside. There’s a reason witches are typically old. This taboo lies at the root not only of Trump’s squeamishness about Clinton’s body (in truth, the bodily functions of all women), but also the infantile anger of some of Sanders’ supporters at a mother figure who just didn’t deliver for them, and then—to make matters worse—refused to shut up and go away. Mothers are the target of vast amounts of repressed and displaced blame, and motherhood, like unruliness, heavily weighted with ambivalence, as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* so brilliantly exposed.



If Clinton were a man, she would be welcomed in prominent post-election roles.

In Ruiz's impassioned words, Clinton does not need to go out gently—or be instructed on “how she should or should not handle her particular, unprecedented situation.” As she reminds her readers, if Clinton were a man, she'd be lionized as a “folkloric political hero”—like John McCain, Joe Biden, and “clearly Sanders.” She would also be able to play a prominent post-election role if she chose to, like other defeated candidates such as Al Gore, McCain, and Mitt Romney. Instead, “people roll their eyes at Clinton and basically say, ‘STFU and take a (literal) hike back to the woods’.... No, Hillary Clinton, the first woman to win a major-party presidential nomination, does not need to shut up about it... not now, not ever.”

And so, Clinton did not break the last glass ceiling. But in refusing to become silent and invisible, she achieved a victory that, like Anita Hill's, will take on growing significance in time. Despite the differences between them, Clinton and Wonder Woman—like Anita Hill—have activated a potent combination of emotions associated with female unruliness. While Clinton has been demonized, Wonder Woman has offered women a catharsis or release of emotions that have been simmering for long time because of our fear that if indeed we do show anger, or laugh “out of turn,” or make an obscene gesture at a powerful man, or expose him as a sexual predator, we are the ones who will have to pay. Remember the effort to criminalize women's laughter when Desiree Fairooz laughed at Jeff Sessions, or the outrage prompted by the woman on the bike who gave the figure to Trump's limousine? As Lindsey West noted in the *New York Times* (“Brave Enough to be Angry” in Nov 8, 2017), these small acts of unruly defiance evoked intense backlash.



Clinton's exuberant laughter distressed pundits.

The tears tied to these events speak volumes about how tired women are of having our emotions, intellects, and experiences dismissed or trivialized. Of stuffing our anger and shame at the routine violations of daily life. Of being told “No, you can't—you're too weak, too old, too fat, too queer, too this or that,” like Clinton, like Diana. Of being told to shut up and go away, or, like Patty Jenkins, of being schooled by powerful (and not so powerful men) about what women want or need.

We have wonder women all around us, on the big screen, on TV, in real life, women refusing to live narrow versions of themselves, whatever the cost. And for me, America Ferrera is one of them—an inspiring example of a young woman who understands the importance of that feminist history drowned out in the ugly campaigns of the past few years, not to mention by the decades of backlash and postfeminism insisting that the feminist struggle is over because it has been won.



Latina actor America Ferrera and Clinton, modeling intersectional, inter-generational feminism.

Ferrera's wish?

“To become the biggest, badass version of myself possible to honor the lives of women like Hillary Clinton, like Gloria Steinem, like Ruth Bader Ginsberg. To honor the sacrifices they made so women of my generation could have more access.”

What a heartening vision of the kind of renewed intergenerational feminism we need in these difficult times! And so as we fight back tears of rage at injustice in any form, let's also welcome tears that speak to our strength and solidarity whenever we see women insisting on their right to live as their most alive selves, fighting what stands in their way or the way of others, with whatever weapons they have at hand, whether magic bracelets, wit or the simple refusal to shut up and go away.



Wonder Woman, still inspiring new generations of girls.

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Notes

1. I will refer to Hillary Rodham Clinton as Clinton, fully aware that this is her husband's name and that she is widely known as "Hillary" in popular discourse. The history of her name, like those of many women of her generation, including myself, is "complicated," in the words of journalist Janell Ross writing in the *Washington Post* ("The Complicated History behind Hillary Clinton's Evolving Name," July 25, 2015). [[return to page 1](#)]
2. In using the first person pronoun to refer to women, I am acknowledging my own identity as a woman, not suggesting that I can or wish to speak for all women.
3. In 1968, she became the first black woman elected to the Congress represented her New York district for seven terms from 1969 to 1983. In 1972, she became the first black candidate for a major party's nomination for President and the first woman to run for the Democratic party's presidential nomination.
4. Important scholarship already exists on superheroes and comics in general, including on Wonder Woman. In this paper, I am interested primarily in how the response to Jenkins' version of Wonder Woman relates to other instances of female unruliness happening contemporaneously.
5. Roxane Gay, author of *Hunger* and other feminist books, and contributor to *New York Times*, gets to the heart of this debate by recounting her changing attitudes to *The Cosby Show*, crucial to her growing up as a black girl but irrevocably tainted once Cosby's history of abusing women came to light. "Can I Enjoy but Denounce the Artist?" [[return to page 2](#)]
6. Meanwhile, by February 2018, the Robert Mueller investigation into Russian meddling in the election confirmed Russian influence in the election to intensify discord, sow skepticism about democratic institutions and favor the Putin-enamored Trump over Clinton.
7. With thanks to Ulrick Casimir.

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Claude Jutra, an introduction

by [Julianne Pidduck](#)



Mythic Quebec filmmaker Claude Jutra in later life.

The Jutra Affair

With this special section, we turn the spotlight on Claude Jutra, a founding figure of Quebec's modern cinema, and one of Canada's most visionary and innovative filmmakers. Although Jutra has been dead for over three decades, he remains a mythic figure in Quebec on the strength of his original and varied filmography and because of his dramatic and curiously cinematic life and death. In 2016, allegations that Jutra was a pedophile were published in a new biography by Yves Lever, unleashing a scandal that shook the Quebec cultural establishment and broader society. In response, the Quebec Minister of Culture ordered that Jutra's name be stripped from the annual Quebec film awards (formerly "*la Soirée des Jutra*" until 2015, and now *Gala Québec Cinéma*) and that his numerous awards be withdrawn. The *Cinémathèque québécoise* followed suit, announcing that the name of its main screening room, the *salle Claude-Jutra*, would be changed. Finally, all of the streets and squares across Quebec named for Jutra were renamed on the authority of the seven municipalities concerned. On February 23, news outlets announced the vandalism of the sculpture "Hommage à Claude Jutra" by renowned sculptor Charles Daudelin; the sculpture was later boxed up, removed from the Parc Claude-Jutra and put into storage.^[1][\[open notes in new window\]](#) It is as if this filmmaker who had so vividly marked the cinema of the Quiet Revolution and the Quebec collective imagination was erased from public memory in the matter of a few days.

In some ways reminiscent of the scandals surrounding Woody Allen, Roman Polanski and other film directors, there are crucial differences. The accused had



Camera eye: "Hommage à Claude Jutra"
(Charles Daudelin, 1999) before and after the
scandal.

been deceased for thirty years at the time of the allegations that date back decades, and no formal charges have ever been laid against Jutra. Further, the objects of the filmmaker's illicit affections were boys, and we can only speculate on how the flames of the scandal were fanned by queer sexuality. Finally, Jutra was a mythic figure of a "minor" national cinema, a film prodigy and poster boy for a modern Quebec cinema given the mandate of forging an autonomous postcolonial cultural identity, and by implication a sovereign nation. The loyalty of many Quebec cultural figures and intellectuals to Jutra's memory helps to ensure that the scandal has not affected public access to his works, at least in the short term. (See the Filmography for information about Internet access to Jutra's works.) In the medium to long term, however, the stigma of child abuse may affect Jutra's standing in Quebec and Canadian film canons.

We have put together this special section on Claude Jutra as a contribution to a more considered public debate that is beginning to emerge as the dust settles after the initial hasty and draconian official responses. On the occasion of Jutra's recent disgrace, we propose a critical and considered return to this gifted and troubling filmmaker. Readers of *Jump Cut* will be interested in the figure of Claude Jutra as a brilliant filmmaker associated with a rich modern Quebec national cinema little known outside of Quebec and Canada. In our respective essays, we have included key contextual information in order to situate Jutra and his works in the dynamic period of post-war Quebec. In light of parallel scandals around artists and public figures, readers will also be interested in our varied critical responses to the Jutra affair. We deploy queer, feminist and postcolonial thought and critique to respond to and to understand otherwise the retrospective moral panic and contemporary ethical dilemmas associated with the "Jutra affair."

This special section brings together five essays addressing different aspects of Jutra's works. Julianne Pidduck's essay, "The 'Affaire Jutra' and the figure of the child," investigates why this scandal became a "national" crisis in Quebec. She analyzes a shifting myth surrounding Jutra in relation to the figure of the child with reference to several of Jutra's 1950s and 1960s documentaries and short works including *Jeunesses musicales* (1956), *Pierrot des bois* (1956), and *Comment savoir* (1966). Next, filmmaker John Greyson's photo essay "Fix Yer Tie: An Ekphrastic Reply to Jutra's Ekleipsis" injects incisive poetic commentary and unexpected humour into our discussion about the scandal, piecing together scraps from Jutra's body of work as an actor and auteur to speak back to what he calls "Quebec's McCarthy's."



Johanne Harrelle and Claude Jutra in *À tout prendre* (1963).

We then turn from these first three essays that directly address the scandal. Given the importance of *À tout prendre* to Jutra's filmography and to this special section (notably for the Rodríguez-Arbolay Jr and Waugh essays), we provide a brief introduction to the film. In "Black Bodies, Queer Desires: Québécois National Anxieties of Race and Sexuality in Jutra's *À tout prendre* (1963)," Gregorio Pablo Rodríguez-Arbolay Jr. analyzes the complex relations of power and performance in *À tout prendre*, an early filmic attempt to explore race in Quebec. This author deploys postcolonial and queer of colour critique to develop fresh insights into this dramatization of a love affair between Jutra (playing himself) and the black model and actress Johanne Harrelle against the backdrop of Quebec's Quiet Revolution.

In "Do You Like Boys?' Claude Jutra's Disappearances: Confession, Courage, Cowardice," Tom Waugh develops a passionate radical queer response to the Jutra affair. His article integrates a close reading of *À tout prendre* (1963), as well as an analysis of six of Jutra's films that are most relevant to the 2016 allegations (*Le Dément du lac de Jean-Jeunes* (1948), *À tout prendre*, *Rouli-roulant* (1966), *Wow* (1969), *Dreamspeaker* (1976), and *La Dame en couleurs* (1984)) searching for the secret and the courage as well as the poetry and the erotics.

Finally, we are grateful to Bill Marshall and to McGill-Queen's University Press for having generously granted the permission to reprint an excerpt from Marshall's important 2001 book, *Quebec National Cinema*. Grounded in the book's lucid and carefully argued account of the complexity of Quebec's "national cinema," this excerpt frames Jutra as a Quebec auteur of the 1970s, with close readings of the features produced in Quebec: *À tout prendre*, *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971), *Kamouraska* (1973), *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire* (1975) and *La Dame en couleurs* (1984). With his readings of *Kamouraska* and the underrated *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire*, Marshall's piece complements the other essays in his attention to Jutra's sensitive treatment of women. Finally, we have compiled a comprehensive bibliography with details about access to the works many of which are now streamable online, for free.

Finally, I would like to note that this special section is the fruit of exchanges during three conference panels: the "Reprendre *À tout prendre*" colloquium at the Cinémathèque Québécoise in November 2015,[2] the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Chicago in March 2017, and the Film Studies Association of Canada conference in Toronto in May 2017. The contributors to this special section gratefully acknowledge the invaluable insights of our panel

hosts and respondents Michèle Garneau, Diane Poitras, Pierre Jutras, Frédéric Moffet and Brenda Longfellow.



This still from the animated film *Jutra* (2014) by Marie-Josée Saint-Pierre evokes the many identities of Jutra the actor, screenwriter and director. From the Quiet Revolution, a central theme of Quebec modern national cinema is the quest for an autonomous postcolonial Québécois identity.

Who was Claude Jutra?



Jutra is presented with the Canadian Film Award for *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971).

Claude Jutra was a founding figure of Quebec's modern cinema that emerged in the 1960s. Amidst the political and cultural dynamism of Quebec's *révolution tranquille* (Quiet Revolution), the seventh art had as its mission the forging of a distinct autonomous Québécois imaginary. Jutra's masterpiece *À tout prendre* (1963) is widely recognized as one of the inaugural films of a new wave of Québécois cinema for a secular and progressive independent nation. Formally audacious and daring in its "fuck you!" to much of what a traditional Quebec Catholic society held sacred in 1963, this confessional "auto-fiction" broached taboo subjects of adultery, interracial sexuality, abortion, and homosexuality. Always a showman, with this film Jutra staged his own on-screen coming out as homosexual or bisexual six years before homosexuality was legalized in Canada. Further, Jutra's best loved feature *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971) has been consistently ranked as the best Canadian film.

Even so, Jutra's films and the rich tradition of Quebec cinema that he helped to inspire remain relatively unknown on the international film scene and among film studies scholars. Over the years, some Québécois directors have broken into the international film arena, but the list is short: Denys Arcand (*Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, 1986; *Jésus de Montréal*, 1989; and *The Barbarian Invasions*, [Academy Award], 2003), and more recently Pierre Falardeau (*Monsieur Lazhar*, 2011; *Chuck*, 2016), Jean-Marc Vallée (*C.R.A.Z.Y.*, 2005; *Dallas Buyers Club*, 2013), Denis Villeneuve (*Incendies*, 2010; *Arrival*, 2016), and of course Xavier Dolan. Boy genius Dolan's brash and stylish red carpet entry into Quebec and international film scenes prompts a renewed transnational visibility for Quebec cinema. As a queer prodigy, Dolan in some ways recalls a young Claude Jutra who made his first 40-minute independent film at 18 and won the Canadian film award at 20. Like Dolan, Jutra moved in international art cinema circles, collaborating with film legends Jean Cocteau, Bernardo Bertolucci, Jean Rouch, François Truffaut, and Norman McLaren. Yet while to date Dolan has gone from success to success, Jutra's career was much more uneven with his full share of critical and box-office flops. Also, Jutra struggled to fund his features in Quebec from the late 1950s when the film industry was dominated by documentary production under the auspices of the National Film Board of Canada.



Xavier Dolan's *Mommy* (2014) sweeps the 2015 Jutra awards ...



... and wins Iris award for best film and best director for *Juste la fin du monde/ It's Only the End of the World* (2016).



What's in a name? Formerly called the *Soirée Claude Jutra*, the 2016 annual Quebec film awards were renamed the Gala Québec Cinéma after the Jutra affair. The “Jutra” trophy changed names twice, and it seems that the “Iris” prize has now prevailed.

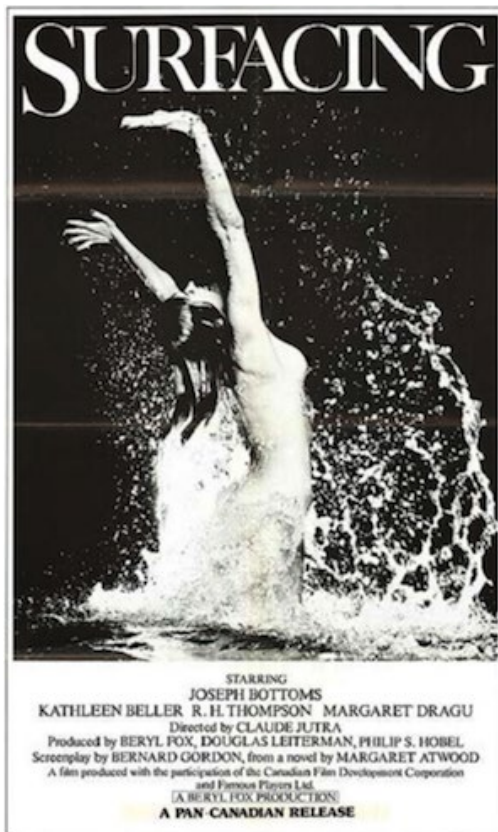
Born in 1930, Jutra completed his first substantial film, *Le Dément du lac Jean-Jeunes* at 18 and won the Canadian film award at 20 for his experimental short *Mouvement perpétuel* (1949). The son of a well-known doctor, Jutra had a comfortable childhood and studied to become a qualified doctor, but famously chose not to practice in order to become a filmmaker. Cutting his teeth as an actor, a screenwriter and a director in the early years of public television at Radio-Canada and at the National Film Board of Canada, Jutra was part of the NFB's legendary *équipe française* (French unit) from the late 1950s. In the creative and collaborative climate of the times, Jutra joined other young wolves of his generation including Denys Arcand, Michel Brault, Gilles Carle, Gilles Groulx, Pierre Perreault and Anne Claire Poirier in documentary production drawing on direct cinema techniques to document the everyday lives of ordinary French Canadians. These filmmakers also went on to establish a distinctly and deeply political Québécois *auteur* cinema in the 1970s.



Pour la suite du monde (1962) directed by Pierre Perrault and Michel Brault of the NFB “French unit”: a feature-length direct cinema documentary that has marked world cinema.



Le chat est dans le sac (Gilles Groulx, 1964): another inaugural film of the Quiet Revolution, alongside *À tout prendre*.



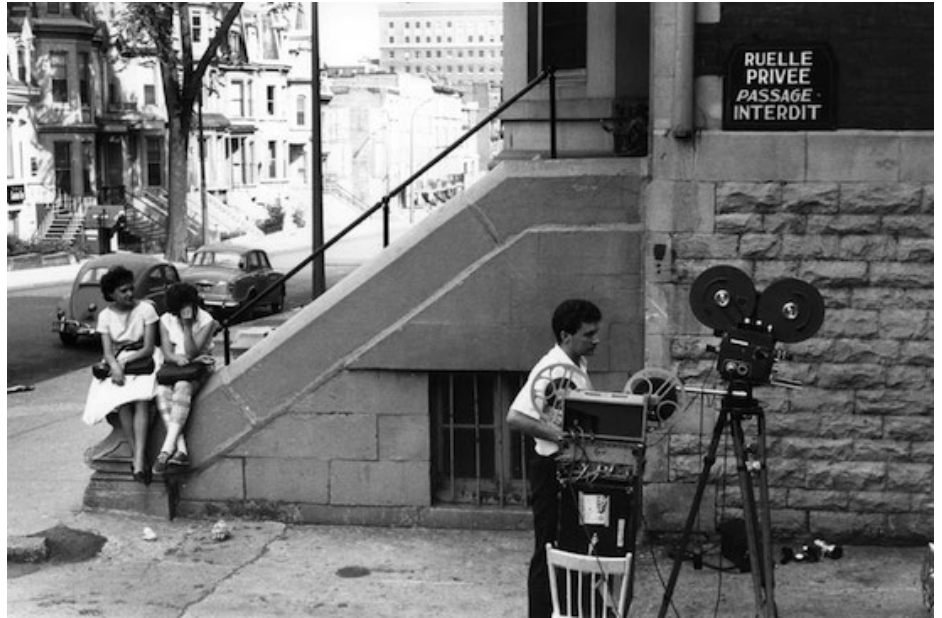
Poster for *Surfacing* (1981), Jutra's adaptation of Atwood's novel generally considered to be "unfilmable." The film is not considered a success.

The best known of his generation of Quebec filmmakers, Jutra directed important documentaries *Niger, jeune République* (1961), *Comment savoir* (1966), and *Wow* (1969). After Jutra's first cinematic feature, the controversial *À tout prendre*, the family romance *Mon oncle Antoine* was undoubtedly his most popular and successful film, sweeping the 1971 Canadian film awards and now a classic of Canadian and Quebec cinema. Jutra also worked extensively for both French (Radio-Canada) and English-language (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) public television, producing a number of documentaries and excellent telefilms including the extraordinary CBC telefilm *Dreamspeaker* (1976). During this period, he also directed a feature film adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1981).

Several factors have contributed to the fact that Jutra and his works are not well known outside of Canada. Given the difficulty in funding feature films, Jutra worked prolifically across different film genres, styles and media platforms in Quebec and in English Canada. Also, there have been problems with copyright, preservation and access to Jutra's films. None of his English-language dramas are in distribution, although *Surfacing* is streamable on YouTube. Further, *À tout prendre*, considered a key film in the Quebec "new wave" of the 1960s and 1970s, was largely unavailable for decades until Jutra's siblings Mimi and Michel Jutra signed over the rights to the Cinémathèque québécoise in 2005; the institution has since made the film available to stream online in three versions. Fortunately, as we detail in the Filmography, many of Jutra's Quebec productions including documentaries and telefilms and features have been digitized and are now publicly available thanks to public and private conservation initiatives.

There is a tragic side to Jutra's life and career that has contributed to his mythic status. *À tout prendre* was a critical and box-office flop at the time of its release in 1963. If *Mon oncle Antoine* marked the pinnacle of his career, Jutra's subsequent film, the costly and much anticipated *Kamouraska* was a commercial and critical disappointment. An avowed sovereignist, Quebec cultural lore has it that Jutra was forced into "exile" in English Canada in 1976 due to a dearth of funding for Quebec feature films. Jutra also faced personal difficulties that were woven into the ever-evolving myth: Suffering from Alzheimer's Claude Jutra disappeared in November 1986, and his body was only discovered downriver from Montreal six months later; he had committed suicide by jumping off the Jacques-Cartier

Bridge in Montreal. Jim Leach argues that while Jutra's suicide was most logically related to his struggle with Alzheimer's, "this explanation did not completely allay suspicions that he had been worn down by the constant struggle to make films in an unsupportive cultural climate" (5). Quebec society mourned the premature loss of one of the most visionary and innovative cultural figures associated with cultural and political dynamism of the Quiet Revolution.



The shoot of *À tout prendre*, Montreal in the early 1960s.

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Notes

1. In June 2016, this park was renamed Parc Ethel-Stark in honour of the violinist and conductor who co-founded the first women's symphony in Montreal and in Canada. The Crescent named after Jutra in northeast Montreal took the name of the first female film director Alice Guy. The choice to name these locations after women responds to a gender imbalance where only 6% of street names in Quebec bear women's names. [[return to text](#)]

2. Organized by Diane Poitras, the “Reprendre à tout prendre” conference, took place on November 12, 2015, at the Cinémathèque québécoise in Montreal: <http://www.cinematheque.qc.ca/en/programmation/projections/film/reprendre-tout-prendre-colloque?pid=20678>

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The “Affaire Jutra” and the figure of the child

by [Julianne Pidduck](#)

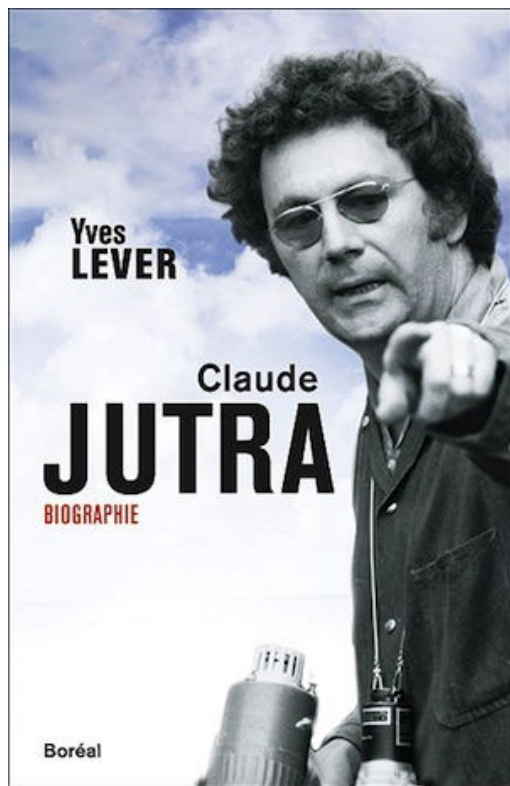


On the shoot of *La Dame en couleurs* [*My Lady of the Paints*]: Jutra's troubling proximity to children.

i. The Jutra Affair

On February 13, 2016, the advance publicity for Yves Lever's biography of iconic Quebec filmmaker Claude Jutra dropped a bombshell: Several individuals interviewed for the book claimed to have been victims of Jutra's sexual advances as children or teenagers. Lever's allegation that the filmmaker had been a pedophile unleashed a highly mediated scandal in the Quebec arts scene. At first, several well-known commentators expressed indignation at this black mark on Jutra's reputation on the basis of anonymous allegations thirty years after his tragic suicide. For instance Lise Payette, the legendary journalist and politician, vehemently rejected Jutra's "execution at dawn." Yet despite numerous passionate defenses by key cultural figures, the scandal that came to be known as the "Affaire Jutra" (the Jutra Affair) was not so easily dissipated. On February 17, Montréal daily *La Presse* published the anonymous testimony of a man given the pseudonym "Jean" describing his sexual abuse over a decade from the age of six at the hands of Jutra, a friend of the family (Pilon-Larose).

That same day, the Québec government and arts community made three extraordinary announcements: The *Ministère de la culture et des communications* and Québec Cinéma announced that Jutra's name be stripped



Yves Lever's 2016 biography of Jutra revealed the filmmaker's love of boys.

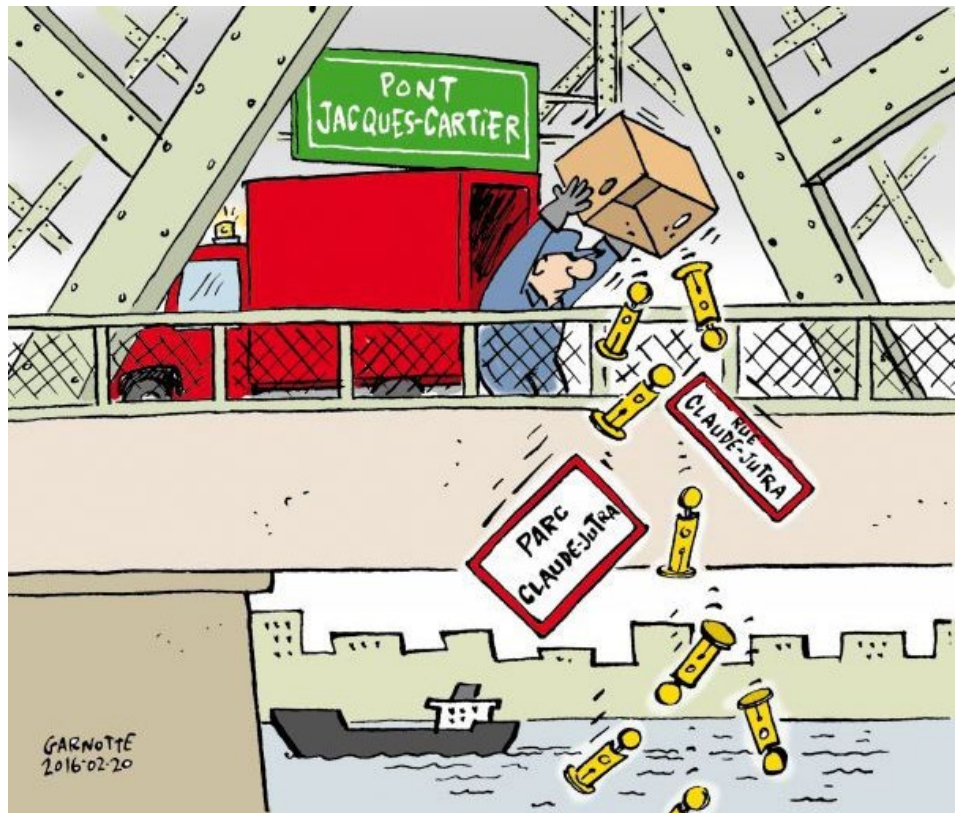


Marc Béland (Jutra's friend who initially defended his honour), biographer Yves Lever and Louise Rinfret (co-writer with Jutra on *La Dame en couleurs*) on the influential news and public affairs show *Tout le monde en parle*.

from the province's annual film awards, and the Canadian Screen Awards withdrew Jutra's name from its award for Best feature by a first-time director. Also, Further, the *Cinémathèque québécoise* announced its decision to change the name of its main screening room that had born Jutra's name since he presided at its inauguration in 1963. Finally, all streets and squares named for Jutra across the province were renamed on the authority of the seven municipalities concerned, with the support of Québec's *Commission de toponymie*. These decisions were taken solely on the basis of anonymous allegations, three days before screenwriter and director Bernard Dansereau was the first and only person to speak *on the record* of rebuffing a sexual advance by Jutra, his godfather, at the age of 12. On February 23, news outlets announced the vandalism of the sculpture "Hommage à Claude Jutra" by renowned sculptor Charles Daudelin; the sculpture was later boxed up, removed from the park and put into storage. It is as if this filmmaker who had so vividly marked the cinema of the Quiet Revolution and the Quebec collective imagination was erased from public memory in the matter of a few days.

The rapid erasure of all official public references to Jutra as an iconic cultural figure profoundly destabilized the province's cultural establishment and the broader Québec society. Why did this posthumous scandal surrounding a filmmaker who has been dead for over thirty years spark a national crisis? While this scandal is in some ways reminiscent of scandals surrounding Michael Jackson, Woody Allen or Roman Polanski, let me point to several salient aspects of the Jutra affair. First, no formal accusation has ever been made against Jutra, who has been dead since 1986.[1] Also, the victims of the filmmaker's alleged abuse were boys, and I can only speculate about how the factor of queer sexuality fanned the flames of a scandal that was significantly media-driven. Finally, Jutra is widely recognized as a founding figure of a "new wave" of Quebec national cinema closely linked to the incomplete project of forging a distinct Québécois cultural identity.

It is not a simple thing to tease out the delicate symbolic and ethical stakes of the Jutra affair. Many Quebec cultural figures and intellectuals have remained loyal to Jutra's memory, helping to ensure that the scandal has not affected public access to his works, at least in the short term. In the medium to long term, however, the stigma of "pedophilia" may affect Jutra's standing in Quebec and Canadian film canons. What is at stake with the Jutra affair for Quebec society, I argue, is more oblique and more profound than censorship. These allegations bring together on the one hand the visceral taboo concerning intergenerational sexual relations and on the other a cultural figure intimately linked with the Quiet Revolution as a point of origin for a modern, secular Quebec. In my broader argument, I analyze the myth surrounding the filmmaker in order to probe the resonance of the Jutra affair in Quebec. Drawing on theories of queer time and the queer child, I examine how the filmmaker's ambiguous proximity to children across his life and works troubles developmental narratives of masculinity, sexuality, and the nation.



This political cartoon shows the sculptural homage to Jutra and the filmmaker's many awards being unceremoniously thrown off the Jacques-Cartier Bridge in Montréal. Note that Jutra committed suicide by jumping off this same bridge in 1986.

First, however, I want to take a considered position in relation to the ethical and political dilemmas of the Jutra affair. When Lever first went public with his allegations, I was inclined to read the scandal sceptically as a media stunt to boost book sales. Like many others, I felt that official responses to anonymous allegations were hasty and draconian, whereby government and cultural institutions distanced themselves from what Gayle Rubin calls “bad, abnormal, unnatural, or damned” sexuality. For instance, on February 15, Québec Cinéma had appointed a *comité des sages* (committee of the wise)[2] to deliberate on Lever’s allegations, only to take a harsh decision on February 17 without awaiting the committee’s findings. In a letter to the editor of the daily *Le Devoir* published eight months later, these four intellectuals compared the rapid official responses to a spring cleaning: “With one great sweep of the broom, it became essential to make Jutra and his works disappear once and for all.” Not only were these decisions taken far too rapidly, they argued, but no action was taken by the *Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux* (Ministry of Health and Social Services) to reinforce or make public contemporary public policies related to sexual abuse (Coupal, Binamé, Aubut and Villemure).

Let me return to the evidence contained in the 2016 biography. Lever mentions that many people in Jutra’s entourage refused to talk to him about the filmmaker’s sexuality, and that others insisted on a predominant attitude of “live and let live” in the 1960s and 1970s. However, Lever mentions that several interviewees attested to Jutra’s privileged relationships with boys younger than eighteen that were not merely platonic; the biographer also mentions rumours that teenaged boys involved in the shoot of *Mon oncle Antoine* had “special” relationships with the director, and that one handsome young actor became Jutra’s “official” lover for several years (153). This is the evidence published in the biography that leads Lever to label Jutra a “pedophile.” Lever excludes the ages of the boys as well as the circumstances of assumed sexual contact between Jutra

and minors, perhaps to protect his sources. There are grey zones, I believe, when it comes to relationships between teenagers and adults, and my point of view is shared by several commentators. Film critic Monica Haim for instance counters what she calls the “lynching” of Jutra, with the key point that the age of consent in Canada from 1892 until 2008 was fourteen. Also, actor Marc Béland who had lived with Jutra for two years initially defended what he saw as consensual sexual relations between the filmmaker and young teenagers who would come to the door to seek out the filmmaker: “It was his life ... And it’s no one else’s business until someone comes forward to make an accusation if he has been abused” (“Révélations”). [2a] Béland later retracted his defense in light of the subsequent testimonies by “Jean” and Bernard Dansereau.



La Presse a rencontré un homme qui dit avoir été la victime du Claude Jutra à partir de ses 6 ans #lapresseplus



AFFAIRE CLAUDE JUTRA

« Claude était pédophile »

Une deuxième victime se confie à La Presse

HUGO PILON-LAROSE
LA PRESSE

« Il s'est glissé dans mon lit et a tenté de m'entraîner dans un rapport sexuel. J'avais 12 ou 13 ans, j'étais prépubère. »

Le scénariste Bernard Dansereau (*Annie et ses hommes*, *Toute la vérité*) affirme à son tour que le cinéaste Claude Jutra – son parrain – l'a agressé sexuellement. Son témoignage livré par écrit à *La Presse* s'ajoute à celui de Jean (nom fictif), qui nous affirmait plus tôt cette semaine qu'il avait été victime d'agressions répétées de Claude Jutra entre l'âge de 6 et 16 ans.

Un soir qu'il dormait chez Claude Jutra, ce dernier l'a entraîné dans une chambre, raconte M. Dansereau. « Il n'y a jamais eu quoi que ce soit d'ambigu dans nos rapports. Claude était un parrain modèle jusqu'au soir où, un peu soûl (ou peut-être même

QUI EST BERNARD DANSEREAU ?

- Scénariste et réalisateur
- Il scénarise le long métrage *Doux aveux*, réalisé par son père en 1982.
- Il a collaboré à l'écriture des séries *Deux frères*, *Casern 24* et *Le monde de Charlotte*.
- Avec Annie Piérard, sa conjointe, il a écrit les séries à succès *Annie et ses hommes* et *Toute la vérité*. Ils ont aussi signé le scénario du film *Secret de banlieue* en 2002.
- La prochaine série du duo sera *L'imposteur*, mettant en vedette Marc-André Grondin.

Qui est Bernard Dansereau ?

Qui est Fernand Dansereau ?

Dans la biographie d'Yves Lever

Game-changing testimonies published in the Montréal daily *La Presse*: anonymous victim “Jean” attests to “Ten years of hell,” and Bernard Dansereau reveals how Jutra “slipped into his bed” when he was 12 or 13.

For me and for many others, the most serious allegations came from “Jean” who presented a detailed anonymous account of a decade of sexual abuse from the age of six, and Bernard Dansereau’s brave decision to speak on the record. Queer or sexual libertarian perspectives, including the arguments put forward by Tom Waugh and John Greyson in this special section, offer important critiques of moral panics. Yet as a queer thinker who is also a feminist, I weigh the dangers of sexual intolerance against the very real spectre of harm and the difficulties of speaking out about sexual assault. In Québec and elsewhere the feminist movement has played a crucial role in challenging the silences surrounding sexual violence of all kinds and its banalization, and in bringing to light its lasting traumatic effect. In an account that aligns all too well with other cases of childhood sexual abuse, “Jean” also recounts how his schoolwork was affected at the time, and how he later suffered from alcoholism and depression as an adult. When asked by a journalist why he had not spoken to his family about the abuse, the witness’s response was more than plausible: “It was probably because of the name ‘Jutra’ and all that it represented. I didn’t feel able to break all that” (Pilon-Larose). Here, “Jean” evokes the veritable aura surrounding Jutra, a renown that could well have contributed to the filmmaker’s powers of persuasion. The day after “Jean’s” anonymous testimony, Lever stated on the radio that he knew of two other children who had similar experiences with Jutra over shorter time-frames, but that they had not suffered the same devastating long-term effects as “Jean” (“Affaire Jutra”).

As a queer and feminist mom, I am sensitive to children’s eroticism, their sensuality and sexual curiosity, and the importance of facilitating a confident and curious relation to sexuality. I am also attuned to the tremendous trust that children place in adults, a trust that along with their dependence on us leads to their incalculable vulnerability. Audre Lorde has influentially pointed out the power of eroticism as a “resource” for women, but also the damage that comes with the exploitation or misnaming of this “depth of feeling” that she sees as the crux of the life force. While of particular significance to women, Lorde’s account insists on the vital importance of an autonomous sexuality for each person. In this light, we can grasp something of the damage evoked by “Jean” when he states that that “Jutra was the first one to touch me, even before I discovered sexual pleasure for myself” (cited in Pilon-Larose). As with gender relations, intergenerational relationships are framed by social pressures and relations of power and desire. These dynamics place adults – parents, teachers, family friends and relatives, mentors and baby-sitters – in positions of authority and in privileged proximity to children. For me, with this proximity and authority comes an absolute ethical responsibility to respect each child’s emotional and physical integrity. Even as I am outraged for the many women who have suffered sexual violence, I am outraged for “Jean” among many young people who have suffered sexual abuse at the hands of Jutra and others.

This ethical position could lead me to join those who would erase, or at the very least challenge Jutra’s memory as a cherished symbol of the cultural effervescence of the Quiet Revolution. However, I am also wary of the horrors committed “in the name of the child.” I choose to contribute to a considered public debate in order to break the deadlock between a retrospective moral panic on the one hand and on the other the disavowal of any harm caused by Jutra founded on the sanctity of the artist or a sexual libertarian ethic. In the two-part analysis that follows, I first develop a queer reading of the potent myth surrounding Jutra in order to trace why this scandal so deeply disturbed cherished discourses of Quebec culture and nation. Next, I turn to the polysemic figure of the child at the heart of the Jutra affair, attending to the multiple discourses and framings of children and youth in several key films.

ii. The Jutra myth: failure and arrested development

A history of the present

In this section, I present a myth that developed throughout Jutra's brilliant and uneven career, gaining momentum after the filmmaker's tragic early death in 1986. Jutra is remembered as a multi-talented child prodigy who has been retrospectively constructed in journalistic and scholarly discourses as Québec's first genuine *auteur*, a leading figure in a modern national cinema. Jutra's career spanned the crucial historical period bridging the end of what is known as the *Grande noirceur* (the Great Darkness) and the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s. The Quiet Revolution was a period of tremendous cultural and political effervescence marking Québec's belated entry into modernity. Jutra was the most visible of a group of talented filmmakers who founded a "new wave" of modern Québec cinema from the late 1950s. In order to grasp the resonance of the Jutra myth, it is important to understand that the development of an autonomous postcolonial Québécois cultural identity has been seen as the lifeblood crucial of Québec's aspirations for sovereignty (Weinmann 1991, Poirier).

This heady historical period also corresponds with the sexual revolution in Québec associated with a refusal of the sexual and social norms imposed by the Catholic Church that had dominated Québec society from the colonial period. Alongside the sexual and Quiet revolutions, Québec second wave feminism and lesbian and gay liberation emerged at the end of the 1960s. The myth of Jutra is closely bound up with a widespread contemporary understanding of the Quiet Revolution as a founding decade for modern Québec society, a social democratic and sexually liberated society. If Jutra has in some ways come to embody the cultural dynamism and creativity of the Quiet Revolution, he has also been read by some as a courageous pioneer of gay liberation. Notably, Tom Waugh identifies the first fleeting glimpse of same-sex desire on Québec screens with Jutra's 1963 *À tout prendre* [*All Things Considered* or *Take It All*] with Jutra's confession "I love boys" (see the analysis of this pivotal sequence in the essays by Rodríguez-Arbolay Jr. and Waugh in this special section). On a queer reading, this early pre-liberation sequence is a remarkable exception that proves the rule in a cinema constrained by Catholic morality, censorship and homophobia. Despite the absence of explicit homosexuality in Jutra's subsequent filmography, Waugh reclaims Jutra as an "ancestor, enigma and martyr of lesbian and gay cinema in Canada" (437).

Reading back from a present so indelibly marked by the Jutra affair, I develop a genealogical reading of the shifting myth of Jutra, who has been consistently framed as an allegory of the tremendous promise and failure Québec's socio-political and cultural "coming of age." Foucault's concept of genealogy proposes a historiographical inquiry informed by the dilemmas and the emergencies of the present. Genealogy involves a refusal of origin, continuity and linear causality, proposing instead to

"follow the complex course of descent" that implies "maintain[ing] passing events in their proper dispersion; identify[ing] the accidents, the minute deviations ... the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us" (Foucault 146).

This genealogical refusal of origins informs my choice to structure this essay as an encounter between several distinct yet complexly interrelated "courses of descent" that feed into the changing myth of Jutra's life and works that coincide with multiple "origins": a distinct postcolonial cultural identity and the unfinished emergence of a sovereign modern nation; a trajectory of feminist and gay and lesbian liberation often associated with the ideal of the modern progressive Québec; and finally, changing socio-historical discourses around children and

youth.



Jutra hosts the Radio-Canada television series *Images en boîte* (1954).

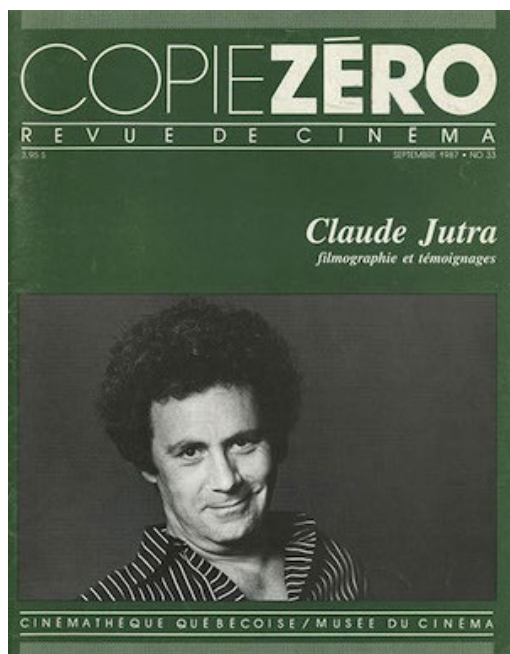
I argue that in toppling this iconic figure of origins from his pedestal, the 2016 Jutra affair called into question several foundational myths associated with the emergence of modern, secular Québec society. I deploy genealogical inquiry and theories of queer time to probe how Jutra as a queer figure troubles a linear account of the unfinished emergence of Québec modernity from the Quiet Revolution. Let me now turn to the peculiarly cinematic figure of Jutra, who has been consistently framed as an allegory of the tremendous promise and failure Québec's socio-political and cultural "coming of age."

The Jutra myth

"Claude Jutra was *cinema*. He was at once 24 images per second and poetry (PIERROT DES BOIS), he was montage, the very essence of cinema (LES ENFANTS DU SILENCE), he was sensitivity and poetry, he was shot, frame and creativity, he was a dictionary of cinema (IMAGES EN BOÎTE), he was at once a man of science and a man of letters, he drew and painted like an artist, he wrote like a poet" (Brault, my translation).

This powerful statement by Michel Brault captures something of the romantic myth of Jutra as a cinematic genius and a Renaissance man. Brault's account as only one of many homages to the filmmaker published in a commemorative issue of *Copie zéro* after Jutra's death.

Born in 1930, Claude Jutra was a trained actor, screenwriter and director, and an



A special commemorative issue of Québec film magazine *Copie zéro* published in 1987, a year after Jutra's death.



Jutra collaborating with Norman McLaren on *A Chairy Tale* (1957).

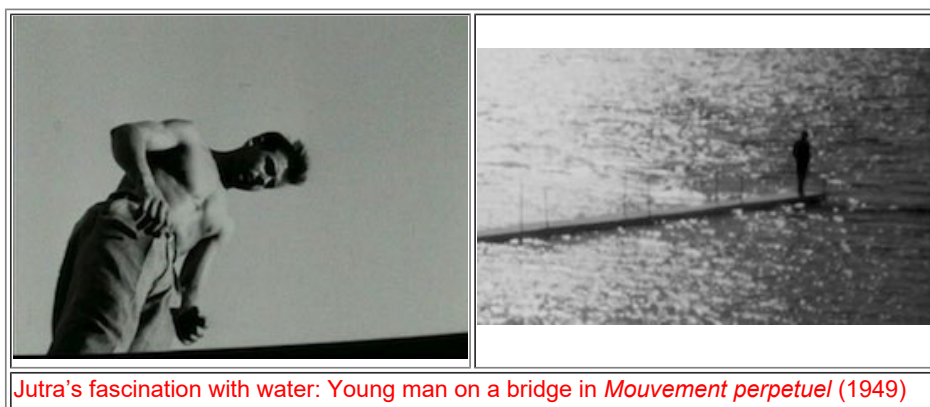
accomplished visual artist. He completed his first film *Le Dément du lac Jean-Jeunes* (1948) at 18, and year later his experimental short *Mouvement perpétuel* [*Perpetual Movement*] (1949) won the prize for Best Amateur Film at the Canadian Film Awards. The son of a well-known doctor, Jutra had a privileged childhood and studied to become a qualified doctor, but chose to turn to filmmaking instead. As a young man, Jutra was active in the first “Golden years” of Québec public television as a screenwriter, director and host of a series about cinema entitled “*Images en boîte*” (1954). A member of the National Film Board of Canada’s legendary *équipe française* (French unit), he participated in many documentaries including *La lutte* [*Wrestling*] (1961), *Comment savoir* [*Knowing to Learn*] (1966), and *Wow* (1969). In 1957, he starred in the short pixillated film *Il était une chaise* [*A Fairy Tale*], which he co-directed with animation legend Norman McLaren. In a career that coincided with direct cinema, the U.S. avant-garde, the French New Wave, and European art cinema, Jutra collaborated with legendary European cultural figures including Jean Cocteau, Bernardo Bertolucci, Jean Rouch, and François Truffaut. Finally, *Mon oncle Antoine*, Jutra’s most critically and commercially successful feature won numerous awards and has become a classic of Canadian and Québec cinema.

Jutra’s early successes were offset by a series of personal and professional disappointments and failures. Partly self-financed, his first feature *À tout prendre* was a critical and box-office flop at the time of its release in 1963, and Jutra was left bitter and burdened with debt. If *Mon oncle Antoine* [*My Uncle Antoine*] (1971) marked the pinnacle of his career, Jutra’s next two films were also critical and commercial failures: the costly and much anticipated *Kamouraska* (1973) starring Geneviève Bujold and *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire* (1975). Unable to find funding for his films in Québec, this committed sovereignist was forced to work in English Canada from 1976. In his discussion of the Jutra myth, Mario Patry describes what came to be known in Québec as Jutra’s “exile” to English Canada:

“Unable to find work in 1975 after never having earned more than \$9,000 during the 1970s (while a filmmaker employed at the NFB earned \$12,000), his exile sounded the death knell for the Québec film industry” (17).

Jutra also faced personal difficulties that were woven into his ever-evolving myth, including a nearly fatal scooter accident on the Jacques-Cartier Bridge in 1967. In the last years of his life, Jutra returned to Montréal where he lived in relative poverty and had trouble working due to Alzheimer’s. A life and a career that had begun so brilliantly ended tragically. Jutra disappeared on November 5, 1986, and his body was only found the following spring on the banks of the St Lawrence River down river from Montréal. Leach argues that while Jutra’s suicide was most logically related to his struggle with Alzheimer’s,

“this explanation did not completely allay suspicions that he had been worn down by the constant struggle to make films in an unsupportive cultural climate” (5).



Jutra's fascination with water: Young man on a bridge in *Mouvement perpétuel* (1949)

Crucial to the myth that crystallized after Jutra's death is an extraordinary cross-fertilization between personal experience and cinematic images. Jutra's suicide by drowning after jumping off the Jacques-Cartier Bridge was prefaced by a career-long fascination with water, including several cinematic rehearsals of men falling into water from a height (*Le Dément du Lac Jean-Jeunes*, *Mouvement perpétuel*). Most famously, in the dénouement of *À tout prendre*, Jutra, playing a version of himself, deliberately walks off the end of a dock into a river. In the film's closing sequences, Claude's friends search everywhere for their missing crony, asking each other: "Have you seen Claude?" The animated short *Jutra*, part of an extensive media archive surrounding the filmmaker, returns to this moment.



MISSING: a frame from Marie-Josée Saint-Pierre's remarkable animated and compilation film *Jutra* (2013). This film can be streamed for free from the NFB website at: https://www.onf.ca/film/jutra_fr/

Jutra's tragic later years and his death by suicide fuelled a posthumous myth surrounding the filmmaker. A revisionist return to *À tout prendre*, his most personal and ambitious auto-fiction, contributed to this process. With its scandalous references to adultery, interracial sexual relationships, abortion and homosexuality, *À tout prendre* was released to mixed reviews in a conservative Québec society in 1963. Most critics agreed on Jutra's extraordinary potential, originality, innovative technique, and his "talent fou" (extraordinary talent). At the same time, the film was critiqued as being too personal, as narcissistic, and as privileging technique over substance. Interestingly, few reviewers directly address the film's coming out sequence, evoking instead its "moral strip-tease" and its unfashionable focus on a bourgeois "bohemian" milieu. Finally, several critics described *À tout prendre* as a promising yet "immature" or "adolescent" work, keenly anticipating Jutra's "mature" films to come (Basile).

Out of circulation for a number of years, *À tout prendre* was later reassessed by critics. For instance, in 2000 Jean Chabot heralds *À tout prendre* as "the first great film of personal expression produced in Québec":

"In a society still dominated by the image of saint Joseph, who has become an emblematic figure for the nation Jutra made a resounding statement. He said: 'I am a bastard.' He said: 'I am something other than what the discourse of national survival wishes me to be or remain. I am searching for a different ethic'" (Chabot 25-26).

Here, Chabot reclaims *À tout prendre* as a prescient masterpiece, a resounding "revendication of liberty" (26). Chabot's articulation of sexual and creative liberty

with sovereignty is eloquent but far from isolated. Jean-Pierre Sirois-Trahan has recently argued that *À tout prendre* carved out a cinematic space for a “politics of intimacy” that “foils all the social and political taboos that weigh on the intimate sphere” (20). As a crucial moment in the evolving Jutra myth, these critics celebrate the film’s bold, scandalous, and explicitly sexual qualities as marking a decisive break with the stifling sexual repression of the *Grande noirceur*. In these readings aligning the Quiet and sexual “revolutions” enable a retrospective reclaiming of Jutra the homosexual as a figure of national liberation. With the 2016 scandal, however, Jutra the pedophile has been summarily rejected, even “abjected,” from the progressive project of Québec national liberation.

The Jutra myth hovers on the cusp of stigma and affirmation that for Heather Love has indelibly marked queer experience and identity:

“On the one hand, it continues to be understood as a form of damaged or compromised activity; on the other hand, the characteristic forms of gay freedom are produced in response to this history. Pride and visibility offer antidotes to shame and the legacy of the closet ... Queerness is structured by this central turn, it is both abject and exalted, a mixture of delicious and freak” (2-3).

This account succinctly encapsulates how affectively charged discourses of pride and shame have contributed to the profound contemporary resonance of the Jutra affair. The disgrace of a filmmaker who has been evoked as a mythic and founding figure in the forging of a distinct Québécois national identity and imaginary has led to a scandal of national proportions.



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

From romantic myth to arrested development

Continually rehearsed across an expansive media archive, Jutra's professional disappointments and personal tragedies have continued to fuel the myth since his dramatic disappearance and death. The Jutra myth has often taken shape as a romantic tale of a brilliant artist misunderstood or down on his luck, a child prodigy whose tremendous potential remained unfulfilled. As a highly visible cinematic auteur, he fits the bill of a suffering (male) artistic genius. He has also been perceived by a Québec sovereignist genealogy as an incredibly talented Québécois artist forced into exile by a society that did not appreciate or finance autonomous Québécois cultural production. Finally, as mentioned above, Waugh celebrates Jutra through a gay liberationist genealogy as an ancestor and martyr of queer Canadian cinema. Paule Baillargeon's biographical documentary *Claude Jutra, portrait sur film* (2002) takes up something of the pathos that is integral to Jutra's shifting myth. Consider for instance the opening narration where the filmmaker voices her impressions of Jutra at the end of his life:

"I knew he was a kind of a genius who had been famous, that he had many admirers and friends and that [at the end of his life] he was poor and alone, that he had memory problems. Today, a few years later, I wonder who he was, this man full of shadows who was born in the light?"

In his well-researched but less-than-generous biography, Yves Lever explicitly sets out to debunk this romantic myth. The biographer insists on the filmmaker's unrealized potential, on his failure to produce a "mature" oeuvre. With this severe assessment, the biographer transposes an established cultural narrative of tragic genius into a discourse of arrested development. Notably, in his closing assessment of Jutra's legacy, Lever writes:

"The centrality of themes of childhood and adolescence in a number of Jutra's films lead to this pointed question: how to become an adult? Even today, the quest for maturity persists in debates around national identity" (328).



Here, Lever echoes the discourses of immaturity that circulated around *À tout prendre* at the time of its release. One of the most in-depth and scathing critiques was written by Denys Arcand, another well-known filmmaker of the Quiet Revolution: “*À tout prendre*, like the majority of our works of art is the story of failure and flight.” He situates Jutra among “educated and sensitive French Canadian man in his thirties” who are fascinated by “black, yellow, red or broadly ‘foreign’ women’.” Arcand goes on to argue that these men are held back by their controlling mothers in a culture of absent or weak fathers (in *À tout prendre*, Jutra dramatizes his intense relationship with his domineering mother). In their unconscious refusal of white French Canadian women, men like Jutra, he argues, are unable to achieve an “everyday” virile (hetero)sexuality essential to national liberation (97).

Arcand’s homophobic, sexist and racist critique correlates closely with recurring tropes of immaturity that for Robert Schwartzwald have been insistently linked since the 1950s with the failure of Québécois heterosexual masculinity and the arrested development of the nation. For this author, in a context where “the burden of a collective shortcoming haunts the colonized consciousness,” the figure of the homosexual (who is unable to reproduce or parent) marks a “failure of filiation.” Schwartzwald goes on to argue that

“the heterosexual syntax in relation to which the homosexual is a failure is necessarily evocative of the Québécois’ own failure to achieve national ‘maturity’” (267-269).

Lever’s 2016 account is particularly problematic in its collapse of an allegorical account of collective failure or disappointment to a judgment of Jutra himself. In the biography’s early pages, Lever suggests that Jutra was more flash than substance, that he “wanted to be visible everywhere” (12), and that his mediated public persona outstripped his actual cinematic achievements. He also points out that by 1962 (the year before the release of *À tout prendre*) Jutra had only directed a handful of short films and the telefilm *Les Mains nettes* (1958). Even so, he had somehow become “a libertarian figure emblematic of creativity, of the *auteur* who made no concessions, of the cultivated dandy, of the explorer of all kinds of cinema, of the complete artist” (10). Lever insistently links this account of Jutra the narcissistic queer artist to a narrative of failure steeped in homophobia.

Queer theorist Judith Halberstam critiques the “schedule of normativity” that upholds the respectability associated with a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality. She argues that the time of reproduction and inheritance “connects the individual and the family to the historical past of the nation,” and to the “future of both familial and national stability” (5). Hegemonic Québec discourses of progress and modernity exemplify this “schedule of normativity” that consistently foregrounds the linear discourse of an emerging “modern” nation. Judged against normative accounts of individual sexual and social development, queer lives commonly confound the “schedule of normativity,” only to be understood through tropes of “failure,” immaturity, or “arrested development.” A case in point, Lever’s account of Jutra is premised on a problematic discursive alignment of different scales and registers of experience (gender, sexuality, cultural production, and nation). Profoundly flawed for its inability to offer a nuanced understanding of any of these distinct scales, this style of argument is particularly repugnant to a queer insistence on specificity. As Sedgwick argues,

“the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” that constitute anyone’s gender or sexuality “aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (1994 10).

Affaire Jutra: Fait connu?



NR

“The Jutra affair: a known fact?” One of several political cartoons targeting the Jutra affair in Mathieu Rodrigue’s blog. <http://mathieurodrigue.ca/affaire-jutra-sketches/>

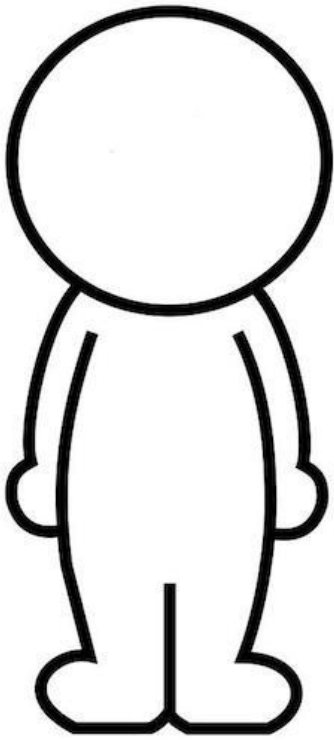
I pursue this reflection in the next section, taking up Jutra’s self-avowed “childlike” qualities and his cinematic fascination with children in light of the 2016 Jutra affair. In the process, I continue to untangle the knotted genealogical strands that contribute to Jutra’s stigma and queerness: not only his problematic “queer” erotic fascination with children, but also his “failure” to conform to norms of masculine heterosexual development.

iii. Jutra and the figure of the child

The open secret

Part of the peculiarity of the Jutra affair is that the filmmaker’s erotic fascination with prepubescent boys and teenagers was an “open secret.” As early as 1970, critic and novelist Dominique Noguez refers indirectly to Jutra’s love of boys.[3] This author does not directly mention pedophilia, but his article is prefaced with a pithy quote from André Gide: “They say that I run after my youth. That is true. And not only my own” (40). When the scandal broke in 2016, Paule Baillargeon commented succinctly: “Everyone in the cinema milieu knows that [Claude loved boys]. We know because it is expressed in Claude Jutra’s oeuvre.” She goes on to mention that in her biographical documentary about Jutra, “I made a point to find elements that could tell us that: ‘I love boys.’ I find [the scandal unleashed by Lever’s allegations] a bit hypocritical” (cited in Lévesque).[4]. Presumably, this comment made prior to the testimonies of “Jean” and Bernard Dansereau refers to Jutra’s open sexual relations with teenagers.

Tom Waugh (1981) has convincingly documented the “queer-baiting” that followed Jutra’s audacious on-screen coming out as gay or bisexual in *À tout prendre*. This queer film scholar has gone on to argue that it was not strictly Jutra’s homosexuality that dogged the filmmaker for most of his adult life, but a



The figure of the child: a blank slate?

“An extraordinary childhood”:



far more visceral taboo. In 2006, Waugh argued (almost) explicitly that “intergenerational eroticism” was crucial to Jutra’s “artistic energy,” and that this erotic sensibility contributed to his “anomalous and contradictory position” in the Canadian/Québec film canon (438). Labelled and filed neatly under the category of “pedophilia” by Lever in 2016, this stigma converges around the potent and polysemic discursive figure of the child: the child as innocence, purity and vulnerability, or as potential incarnating the future of the family, of the race, of the nation.

As we return to Jutra’s films in light of the scandal, Jutra’s erotic sensibility was in plain view in Jutra’s work from *Le Dément du lac Jean-Jeunes* (1948) with its extended homoerotic sequences of boy scouts frolicking in their underpants in a lake. As I trawl through the expansive mediate archive surrounding Jutra, it seems as if the filmmaker consciously or unconsciously left a trail of breadcrumbs that were later retraced and scattered again by umpteen critics, commentators, and spectators. This phenomenon is reminiscent of what Eve Sedgwick calls the “ignorance effects” generated by the open sexual secret of homosexuality:

“Knowledge, after all, is not itself power, although it is the magnetic field of power. Ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons” (4).

In a queer deconstruction of fixed sexual identities (homosexual, pedophile), Sedgwick’s account facilitates an understanding of the unstable and generative meanings attached to stigmatized sexual practices. At the heart of the “magnetic field” of the Jutra affair is the potent and polysemic figure of the child.

In order to diffuse the retrospective moral panic unleashed by the Jutra affair, I find it helpful to establish the discursive figure of the child as a social construction, a potent signifier of potential or development that makes it available for all manner of adult projection. I take this tack not to deny the realness, vulnerability and singularity of actual flesh and blood children, but to highlight how our perceptions and relationships with “real” children are shrouded in instrumental projections. Claudia Castañeda argues that the figure of the child is grounded in a curious quality of “mutability itself”:

“It is not simply that ‘the child’ is a sign, a category, or representation that can be read in multiple ways. What is distinctive about the child is that it has the capacity for transformation. ... This implies that the child is also never complete in itself. It is precisely this incompleteness and its accompanying instability that makes the child so apparently available: it is not yet fully formed and so open to re-formation” (2).

In the case of Jutra, the unstable signifier of the child is particularly volatile. While Jutra’s oeuvre has been celebrated for its sensitivity to children’s experience, his association with children and childhood extends to his highly mediated public image.

In 2011, an anonymous vlogger with the handle “tao8way” posted a video on YouTube entitled “Children of Claude Jutra.” This video is a montage of different



These images of Jutra as a boy have circulated widely.

elements, some of which are taken from Baillargeon's biopic: interviews with Jutra intercut with home movies and photographs of the filmmaker as a child, as well as sequences featuring pubescent and pre-pubescent boys from *Jeunesses musicales* (1956), *Mon oncle Antoine*, and *Dreamspeaker* (1976). The video is prefaced by a dedication: "This is my small thanks to Claude Jutra (1930-1986), the Canadian film director who made the films 'My Uncle Antoine' and 'Dreamspeaker'." The montage includes a subtitled interview with Jutra near the end of his life:

"I'm a perpetual child. I identify with childhood. I don't know why. Probably because I had an extraordinary childhood, filled with happiness. ... On the other hand, I had a lot of darkness that I kept to myself, that I hid. But the blackness came out later."

Following the trails of breadcrumbs left behind by Jutra, Baillargeon, Waugh, and others, the video also incorporates an interview with Canadian actor Saul Rubinek, Jutra's friend and collaborator in the latter part of his life.

"Claude protected his childlikeness to a great extent. He wanted to remain a child and his silliness is a result of that ... His way of behaving, his way of directing ... was to stay a child, to look at the world through childlike eyes, to have a naiveté, to be able to see a butterfly for the first time or an emotion ... or a tragedy, without cynicism. [...] That's why he could see what other people couldn't see."

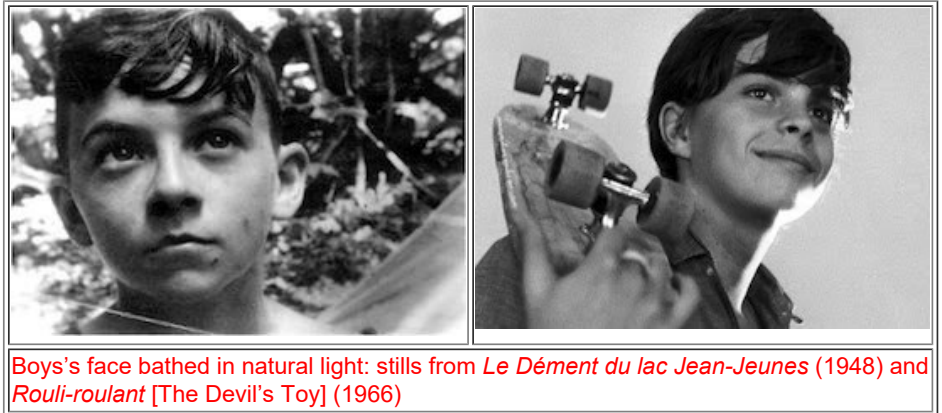
Rubinek highlights a *way of seeing*, a fresh, curious and unsentimental child's gaze foregrounded in many of Jutra's films. Returning to some of Jutra's key works, I trace a mobile gaze associated with the figure of the child as subject of the films' narration (*Jeunesses musicales*, *Mon oncle Antoine*, *La Dame en couleurs* [*Our Lady of the Paints* or *The Lady of Colours*]. This is a reversible gaze that persistently frames the child as an object of desire, identification and other affective projections that are difficult to pin down.

I read this post as a vivid example of queer "retrospectatorship" in the digital age, where "texts of the past, reordered and contextualized, are experienced anew in a different filmgoing culture" (White 197). Patricia White argues that this

"epistemological project of lesbian and gay readings of 'dominant' films is not simply a decoding process ... Rather, it is an encoding process, a textual re-vision with the reader-critic as subject of its fantasy" (205).

"tao8way" clearly took a lot of time to splice together fragments of Jutra's films and an expansive media archive surrounding him. The result is a video that distills and relays recognizable representations of the child and associated ways of looking with and at children. Home movie footage and photographs of Jutra as a small child are edited together with interview segments and lush homoerotic

sequences featuring boys and teenagers in a manner that confounds the distinctions between “Claude” and young boys as subject and object of the camera. What emerges is a reversible homoerotic and autoerotic gaze that fixes and caresses the beauty of the smooth faces of prepubescent boys, their young bodies in motion, their close physical proximity to and homosocial interactions with other boys and men.



When I came across this video online, I was struck by the way that it distills a *certain quality of looking and being looked at* recognizable with variations across Jutra's oeuvre. With this recognition came the uncomfortable realization of my own pleasure and complicity as I investigate Jutra's exploration of visual codes for representing and looking at children. While some of these codes are palpably rooted in homoerotic visual culture, they are also familiar as part of a visual iconography of childhood. In a comment posted online in response to the 2016 letter to the editor of *Le Devoir* by the “committee of the wise,” a reader named Pierre Lefebvre writes:

“Do you remember when [Jutra] pushes against the boy's shoulder in one of the films? I will never see it in the same way again. [A gesture that] seemed to be perfectly banal is now tarnished by what we have learned” (Coupal *et al*).

While Jutra's films have been celebrated for their sensitive depictions of children and teenagers, this reader is disturbed to perceive that an intergenerational erotic sensibility is part of a common cultural legacy.

Kathryn Bond Stockton argues that moral panics around homosexual “influence” or sexual predilection for children paradoxically cement recurring correlations between homosexuality and childhood (3). In the 20th “century of child” she suggests that a historically specific sentimental fixation on the innocence and purity of children conjures its opposite, violence and sexual depravation. Stockton's attention to the persistent association between homosexuals, arrested development, queer masculinity, perverse sexuality and children is useful for understanding otherwise Jutra's vexed public persona. Stockton draws on James Kincaid's work on erotic innocence to argue that the child's exquisite ‘vacancy’ enables multiple projections by adults. These projections include variations of identification (idealization) and (vilified and disavowed) desire associated with the cinematic gaze. Breaking down the insistent binary opposing the abject figure of the child molester and the idealized figure of the innocent child-victim, this analysis opens toward grey zones of power, consent, children's sensuality and eroticism at the heart of the Jutra affair.

In the film analysis that follows, I explore the polysemic meanings and affects attached to the figure of the child in some of Jutra's works. I begin with two early works from 1956, *Jeunesses musicales* and *Pierrot des bois*. Next, I turn to *Comment savoir*, and *Rouli-roulant [The Devil's Toy]*, two NFB productions from 1966. Finally, I look at two of Jutra's later features featuring children, *Mon oncle*

Antoine and *La Dame en couleurs*. Threaded through these readings are accounts of the films' contexts of production, and an attention to their sociocultural anchorage in shifting historical discourses surrounding children and youth in Quebec.

Two works from 1956: *Jeunesses musicales* and *Pierrot des bois*.

One of Jutra's first films produced at the NFB, *Jeunesses musicales*, helped to establish him as a professional filmmaker. This 43-minute NFB documentary was commissioned to publicize the programme of the same name designed to introduce young people to classical music. Like *Comment savoir* and *Rouli-roulant* produced a decade later, *Jeunesses musicales* has attracted only cursory critical attention. I return to these three documentaries here in order to explore Jutra's treatment of themes of children and youth during the 1950s and 1960s. These NFB documentaries are also of interest for the socio-historical discourses surrounding youth embedded in them as "official" productions of the NFB as a Canadian federal government institution. The NFB had an educational mandate with a particular emphasis on youth in the postwar period, and Zoë Druick argues that its films of the 1950s project "narratives of ideal citizenship" (23).

Jeunesses musicales also corresponds with changing discourses of youth in Québec from the 1940s, where a rural communitarian society changed fundamentally through intensified urbanization and industrialization. Madeleine Gauthier argues that the 1950s marked the beginning of a modern discourse of "youth" as a distinct and idealized category. Alongside a widespread post-war Baby Boom, Québec saw a particular surge in its birth rate associated with the *revanche des berceaux* (revenge of the cradles), in a context where high birthrates were encouraged by the Catholic Church and a francophone elite as a form of resistance to English colonization. While this popular lore has been subsequently challenged, it encapsulates something of the symbolic importance of white Francophone children as a form of demographic resistance ensuring the future of a Québec sovereign nation.

With a nod to *Berlin: symphony of a Great City* (Ruttman 1927), Jutra prefaces *Jeunesses musicales* with a modernist montage that celebrates Montréal as a modern city of the mid-1950s. The film's opening credit montage begins with aerial footage of the city of Montréal accompanied by a soundtrack that mixes the sounds of an orchestra warming up with the sounds of the city. At the end of the credit sequence, there is a close-up of a bellowing factory steam, then aerial footage of children screaming with joy and running pell mell out of a school, through the school yard, and into the street. This sound and image montage continues with footage of jet planes in formation racing against the sky, a tilted close-up on a record player, young people dancing, young men in a café, and a woman in a flashy convertible honking her horn. Next, a slightly longer sequence begins with an aerial shot of a young boy walking slowly along a canal, trailing his finger along the wall beside him. We hear a siren in the distance as the film cuts to a close-up of the boy who turns around to listen. With this stylish opening, we see Jutra the cinephile testing the possibilities of institutional documentary film language of the period.



An idyllic sequence from *Jeunesses musicales* (1956).

In contrast with the opening city sequences and subsequent footage where established musicians perform for youthful audiences, the film's second half unfolds in the idyllic setting of the *Jeunesses musicales* music camp at Mount Orford provincial park. The film language here is contemplative, with a pacing of image and sound that facilitates savouring the music and the scenery. A series of intimate vignettes frame youthful musicians performing against the mountainous and forested backdrop of the park. First, a string quartet of young musicians playing a Haydn number in a forest clearing against a backdrop of cedars. Another vignette features a woodwind trio performing a number by Mozart in an idyllic sun-dappled clearing by a stream that flows into a pond; two young men on bassoon and flute are placed on either side of a young woman playing the oboe seated on a rock beside the pond. They are dressed in light colours that stand out against the textured black and white environment of trees, rocks, and water. These sequences are intercut with group scenes where the young musicians exchange among themselves and with resident instructors in an environment of collaborative and spontaneous learning. The impressionistic canvas of *Jeunesses musicales* offers a romantic view of youth as a privileged period of sensitivity, vitality and purity.

As the title suggests, *Jeunesses musicales* features an ensemble cast, but Jutra singles out a gifted twelve-year-old pianist among the other young people with an attentive, rapturous camera. Jutra returns again and again to the small figure, face and hands of Michel Dussault, the handsome twelve-year-old boy featured in the opening montage. We see him daydreaming in school, in the audience of young people listening to a concert, and finally as a diminutive figure play a grand piano in the middle of a large field on the mountainside.



Playing the piano in the middle of a large field, Dussault gazes intently into the camera and at the audience (*Jeunes musiques*).

Particularly interesting for my purposes here is a coy scene where an older boy leans against the piano, watching Dussault play a Bach fugue. Slightly nervous and awkward, the older boy pontificates about the fugue as a musical game of running away and pursuit. This banal exchange is filmed in a series of tight close-ups edited in a shot-reverse-shot sequence that brings out an intense and ambiguous exchange of looks. Finally, Dussault fixes the older boy for several seconds with a direct and meaningful gaze as he continues to play, and the other boy walks away, flustered. Here, I glimpse a direct, intent, lingering child's gaze that runs like a fugue theme throughout Jutra's oeuvre.[5]



Michel Dussault and an older boy discuss the finer points of the fugue in



... a queer encounter?

Later in the film, we see Dussault taking tickets for a concert at the music camp. As the adults are called into the concert hall, the boy listens from outside, then wanders off (this is the literal meaning of the French word "fugue") into the summer night. In a romantic sequence of moonlight and shadows, camera and faint piano music follow the boy as he scuffs along a dirt path lost in thought. Dussault then reclines in the grass, hands behind his head, and a blurred close-up signal a fantasy montage sequence that builds to the film's climax. The boy appears seated at a grand piano wearing a dark jacket and bowtie playing complex and passionate music in three consecutive and progressively grander venues: First in a community auditorium (again fixing the audience with that intent gaze) to standing ovation, and next in a larger venue where the camera pans over a rose

placed on top of the grand piano. The music and the pace of the montage accelerate with each successive venue, and each performance is rewarded with enthusiastic clapping. In the final formal concert hall, the boy is dressed in a white jacket with a carnation at the lapel; his bow leads to montage of ecstatic clapping. Cut to a long shot of the diminutive pianist on a huge stage, and two little girls emerge from the wings to offer him huge baskets of flowers. Dussault turns toward each girl in turn, bowing slightly, and offers a rose to each girl. Once again, ecstatic clapping and voices cheering “Bravo!”



The child prodigy performs to thunderous applause and heterosexual accolades.

A talented child musician, Michel Dussault would grow up to become a well-known Québec pianist and composer. However, Jutra’s fascination with the child prodigy clearly exceeds an eye for talent. There is an erotic charge, but also very possibly a form of identification. After all, Jutra himself was a multi-talented prodigy, only twenty-six when this documentary was released in 1956. Energetic, playful, optimistic, with a compelling rhythm at once languorous and intense, *Jeunesses musicales* was very well received by audiences and critics of the period. A fine example of how “a filmmaker can use the confines of an official mandate to make evocative art” (Druick 99), *Jeunesses musicales* was broadcast on Radio-Canada, the sole French-language television public channel of the time. It was also distributed across the *Jeunesses musicales* movement in Canada, France and Belgium (Lever 61-64).



It is interesting to set this NFB film in dialogue with *Pierrot des bois*, a nine-minute independent short also completed in 1956. *Pierrot des bois* was the fruit of a legendary collaboration between Jutra and legendary director and cinematographer Michel Brault that is celebrated as part of the lore of Québec cinema of the Quiet Revolution. As the story goes, Jutra’s father offered him a Bolex camera on his sixteenth birthday, around the time that Jutra met Brault at a Boy Scout camp. The teenagers learned their art and trade together, and Brault collaborated on *Le Dément du lac Jean-Jeunes*, as well as Jutra’s most celebrated features including *À tout prendre* and *Mon oncle Antoine*. Like *Dément*, *Pierrot des bois* was filmed in the woods near the Jutras family cottage.

Captured brilliantly by Brault’s camera, Claude Jutra performs Pierrot against the forest backdrop of the Laurentian mountains. Lever notes that mime was Jutra’s favourite activity at theatre school, and his talents are documented in *Pierrot des bois* and *Il était une chaise*. In his performance of Pierrot, Jutra prances and skips through the woods, playing hide and seek with the camera among the trees; the short film is accompanied by a wonderful original soundtrack by NFB composer and sound designer Maurice Blackburn. Jutra’s Pierrot exudes a childlike wonder as he finds a rose and marvels at its beauty, falling in love. In his delight, he floats above ground and capers about with the rose in hand; after a time, Pierrot spins out of control in a tight and giddy close-up. In this simple narrative, the beauty of the rose and Pierrot’s childlike wonder are poignantly ephemeral: Pierrot inadvertently crushes the rose and is crestfallen for a time. He buries the rose, hesitates for a moment, then skips off into the forest, seemingly carefree.



A legendary duo of Québec cinema of the Quiet Revolution: Brault and Jutra during the shoot of *Pierrot des bois* and in 1959.



Jutra encounters the rose in *Pierrot des bois* (1956).



Spinning in a giddy close-up (*Pierrot des bois*).

Lever cites a passage from Jutra's journal written during the shoot that captures something of the joyful exuberance of this moment.

"The weather was splendid, a radiant spring day. In this harsh and wild place, I evolved, I was leaping about, I was in ecstasy in my white satin suit, my face covered in flour, my eyes lined with black, while Michel adeptly manoeuvred the song of the camera. Harmonious friendship in spontaneous exchange, artistic creation in its greatest liberty, the studied contrast between a costume and a setting, nature in spring in its most intimate splendour, could we imagine a more exhilarating day?" (cited in Lever 65).



Childlike but not a child: Watteau's "Pierrot" (1718-1719) and Jean-Louis Barrault in Michel Carné's 1945 *Les enfants de paradis* [*The Children of Paradise*].

Despite the rich citation from Jutra's journal, the ever-sceptical biographer reads "Pierrot's skipping that ends in a drama as an allegory for Claude's [unhappy] love affairs" (65) with young women. By selectively reading Jutra's personal life into the works, in this case failed heterosexual romance, Lever flattens the resonance of this remarkable little short.

As an antidote to Lever's relentless mantra of immaturity and failure, I would argue that Jutra, like Pierrot, falls outside of a "normal" developmental logic. A rose is a rose is a rose What would Gertrude Stein make of the rose of *Pierrot des bois*? The rose may signify failed heterosexual romance, but it could also evoke the ephemeral beauty of this spring day, a desire so unspeakable that it must be cruelly crushed, the fleeting perfect conditions for artistic creation, or the homosocial harmony of friendship and collaboration. Is it too much of a stretch to connect Pierrot's rose with the rose on Michel Dussault's piano in *Jeunesses musicales*? Is Pierrot's failed or unspeakable love, or more alarmingly the crushed and bruised object of this love, a young boy?

Pierrot is an androgynous, whimsical figure who like Jutra is childlike yet not a child. This figure is ethereal in his wonder with every encounter, every perfect and fleeting sketch. From his origins as a stock figure in the 17th century Commedia dell'Arte to nineteenth and twentieth century French stage and screen, Pierrot is suspended in time, neither young nor old. This sensitive and solitary figure stands apart from the fray of life and love in *Enfants de paradis* (Carné 1945)[6] and in Watteau's paintings. Delighted with every encounter, he is often melancholy, always unlucky in love. In *Pierrot des bois*, however, we see the mobile and reversible gaze that observes, desires, and identifies with the ambiguously androgynous and ageless Pierrot, the tragic clown often seen as the artist's alter-ego. As a Romantic and melancholic figure who never enters the realm of "adult" heterosexual sexuality, Pierrot is appealing and unthreatening. When he becomes specifically sexual, however, this queer figure becomes perverse, sinister, uncanny.

For Castañeda, "the condition of childhood ... finds its value in potentiality. At the same time, the form that the child's potentiality takes is consistently framed as a normative one, in relation to which failure is always possible." She goes on to argue: "Should a child either fail to possess or realize its potential (as in the notion of 'stunted growth'), he or she remains a flawed child and an incomplete adult" (4). In her queer account, Stockton fleshes out these norms: children's "supposed gradual growth, their suggested slow unfolding which, unhelpfully, has been relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (hence, 'growing up') toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness" (4). Jutra's "queerness," then, emerges not only from his erotic attraction to children, but also from of his self-avowed childishness, his refusal or inability to grow up.

Pierrot des bois shares with *Jeunesses musicales* a romantic depiction of youth as a time of creativity, exploration, and learning. This romantic sensibility emerges with a particular intensity in *Pierrot des bois* and *À tout prendre*, where Jutra directs and performs for the camera. Marked by a stylistic exploration, these two films celebrate a virtuoso diegetic performance of artistic youthful masculinity on-screen. And yet, read across time in light of the 2016 revelations, there is a darkness and a cruelty in these works. Both films project a heady dramatization of falling in love, followed by hurt, disappointment and abandonment. Further, Jutra focalizes his own desire and subjectivity as subject of the film and of the gaze, in a dynamic that doubly "fixes" the object of desire (the rose, and much more problematically, Johanne Harrelle). The problematic result of this doubled gaze can be seen in *À tout prendre*, where Jutra tends to efface Harrelle's subjectivity and desire, as some critics mentioned at the time. This complex and mobile gaze of desire and identification that projects empathy and cruelty alike is part of Jutra's distinct *auteurist* stamp, a way of looking that emerges most vividly in these early autobiographical works. Once again, Jutra's "erotic sensibilities" are in plain sight. And yet, as Tom Waugh argues in his piece in this special section,

these works are intensely self-aware and confessional.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The perils of pedagogy: *Comment savoir* and *Rouli-roulant*

Several critics have commented on a recurring theme of “pedagogy” or “coming of age” in Jutra’s work. Consider, for instance, this commentary by Noguez in 1971:

“Despite its diversity, a certain unifying theme in Jutra’s oeuvre is his interest, both serious and complicit, in all that is young, both in Québec and elsewhere. ... Youth is at once weakness and strength, incompleteness and plenitude. Jutra is certainly aware of the fragility and the perfectibility of young people: from this awareness springs the pedagogical theme of his work” (41)

In turn, Waugh was the first to directly evoke the erotic charge in Jutra’s fascination with pedagogy. For this author, Jutra’s films foreground processes of growth, education, and socialization “channelled and deepened through the physicality of his pubescent heroes and through his eroticization of the pedagogic interactivity” (442).

The theme of pedagogy is relevant to *Jeunesses musicales* as well as *Comment savoir* and *Rouli-roulant*, two NFB documentaries released in 1966 that explore themes of youth and learning in very different ways. If *Jeunesses musicales* presents a romantic and idealized vision of youth, *Comment savoir* develops a much more normative “modern” vision of pedagogy and youth. *Comment savoir* was an ambitious project for the NFB in 1966 with an estimated budget of \$50,000. The production involved extensive research and location shooting in several U.S. cities, with the goal of documenting new educational trends in North America. This documentary begins with a still image of a young boy’s face in close-up. As the opening credits roll, the camera zooms in closer and closer, to hold on an extreme close-up of one eye. Next, a slightly schizophrenic opening sequence features California surfers on the image track with a voice-over narration:

“A tide of youth is rising, a generation counting on us. They arrive at a decisive moment in human history. They must learn more, learn better, learn faster than ever before. They are faced with a sea of information that modern life demands. They must master it or drown. ...”

The “voice of God” tone of the narration announces a no-nonsense account of education and progress, and yet it is possible to detect traces of Jutra’s signature humour in the water metaphors.

From this preface, cut to children in a primary school science class. The film language is contemplative, with lengthy sequences of young children bathed in natural light, framed in close up at their desks or in groups. The children are silent, busy with their magnifying glasses and rudimentary science experiments. Like some of the scenes in *Jeunesses musicales*, this footage captures something of an idealized discourse of learning described by Jutra in an interview:

“The process of the act of learning and understanding is something very intimate, always solitary, even when it’s happening with someone else close by” (cited in Delahaye 111).

The narrator argues authoritatively that traditional grade schools and rote learning are now a thing of the past, replaced by “ungraded schools,” television





Close-ups on the faces of young boys in science class: *Comment savoir* [How to know] (1966).

learning, “talking machines,” and computers. New advances in education including behaviourism and pedagogical technologies, argues the narrator, offer effective and necessary solutions to the “education problem caused by the population boom.” Aside from the subjective and contemplative sequences mentioned above, the narration and camerawork are for the most part omniscient, with sharp rhetorical separation between “us” the older generation and a rising “tide of youth.” *Comment savoir* delivers what in retrospect comes across as a painfully “straight” account of education, progress, and modernity. Lever (161-164) remarks that the film transmitted a series of messages that teachers in general and bureaucrats of the Canadian Ministry of Education in particular wanted to hear: a behaviourist approach and a fascination with new technologies corresponded well with the ideas that guided North American education reform in the 1960s.

Historian Louise Bienvenue links the “spectacular affirmation” of youth in the 1960s with the coming of age of the post-war baby-boomers and their inclusion into a formal education system, alongside “the new influence of mass media, as well as the [modernist] values of growth and progress” (254). *Comment savoir*, with its insistence on the virtues of modern education, foregrounds a process of normalization. And yet, this feature documentary’s exploration of 1960s youth evokes several disparate discourses. As mentioned above, there is a strikingly “intimate” quality, to use Jutra’s term, to the film’s discrete and extended contemplation of the primary school children. Also, the opening and closing sequences of *Comment savoir* feature tanned and buff California surfers and anti-war protestors in Washington and camped out by the gates of McGill University. Jutra begins to engage ambivalently with 1960s youth counter-culture, and themes of youth rebellion also emerge in the 1969 feature NFB documentary *Wow*.

Rouli-roulant (*The Devil’s Toy*), contrasts sharply with *Comment savoir* in tone, style and subject-matter. This playful film of 15 minutes begins to envision a much more anarchistic and anti-authoritarian youth associated with the late 1960s. The film’s dedication to “all victims of intolerance” is widely understood as a response to the homophobic and conservative responses to *À tout prendre*. And yet, while centrally concerned with questions of power and desire, *Rouli-roulant* like Jutra’s other films is not explicitly “political.” The 15-minute film begins with a travelling shot overlooking down the city of Montréal from Mount Royal. An ironic apocalyptic narration introduces the skateboard in a tone of a moral panic:

“These are the remains of what was once a beautiful city. But the mind of man is as rich in evil as it is in good, and the same inventiveness which blessed us with insulin, electricity, the arts and engineering miracles of all sorts has also cursed us with the sword, the gun, the bomb, and ...”

Here, a dissonant sound cues a close-up of a skateboard decorated with a skull and crossbones. Cut to a montage of pastoral park scenes punctuated with a tolling church bell: families push their babies in prams and play with their children, a family of ducks paddles peaceably in a pond, and a woman walks her little dog. Again, the ominous narration comes in: “It was like a plague that spread from city to city, an epidemic from which no one was secure, a dread disease which needed only pavement to multiply and proliferate.” Next, the sound of skateboard wheels on pavement and a loud siren accompany a low angle shot



Rules of the road: A woman walks her little dog in the orderly streets of mid-1950s Montréal (*The Devil’s Toy*, 1966).

framing the rapid approach of teenagers skateboarding down a hill toward the camera.



Rouli-roulant or *The Devil's Toy* (1966): "a dread disease which needed only pavement to multiply and proliferate."

These opening sequences set up an explicit dissonance between an oppressive voice-over narration and an image track steeped in the movement and grace of the skateboarders. Marked with Jutra's signature humour, this dissonance projects a mockery of the NFB's didactic documentary tone. The narrator goes on to inform the viewer that skateboards have been banned from the city streets because of the threat that they pose. Meanwhile, skateboarders are pictured careening precariously through parks and streets, disrupting everyday city space with their unpredictable trajectories that play havoc with fixed paths and traffic rules.

The film continues with a game of cat and mouse between skateboarders and police, where the skateboards are confiscated and later returned to their rightful owners. The film narrative closes with the montage of the peaceable citizens and the ducks in a pond punctuated by the tolling of the church bells. Cut to a low angle shot of a group of skateboarders silhouetted in shadow against a darkening sky. The voice-over intones: "The battle was won. For the moment we are safe, but beware! The youth of the world is on the move and their aim is to take over."

Here the voice-over gives way to an extended two-minute montage contemplating the graceful and fluid movement of teenagers and children (almost all boys). In contrast with the ominous music and voice-over that dominate the film's first thirteen minutes, the soundtrack accompanying this dénouement is slow and melodic featuring the song "rouli-roulant" sung by Geneviève Bujold. In these sublime sequences, the teenagers seem to be floating.



Ominous shot near the end of *Rouli-roulant*: "The youth of the world is on the move, and their aim is to take over."



Floating: poetic sequences from *Rouli-Roulant*.

As the film sheds the framing device of narration that typically stabilizes the educational message of NFB documentaries of the period, this dénouement opens the space for a celebration the rhythm, speed, and grace of the skateboarders. A

stable and separate positioning of subject and object, “us” and “them,” adults and youth, gives way to a rapt filmic contemplation of boys in full flow.

This is undoubtedly a gaze of desire and possibly of identification, but these terms do not quite grasp the film’s hypnotic effect. Noguez comments on Jutra’s core fascination with a certain quality of youth:

“This mix of strength and grace, of passion and reverie ... Rarely has a filmmaker so passionately and so modestly sought to get under the skin of young people” (43).

And yet, even with the hindsight provided by the 2016 Jutra affair, these images remain stubbornly polysemic. These sequences could be seen to unveil imposed frames and discourses of youth to give way to a direct gaze that could either be seen as more “free” or more perversely scopophilic. Alternately, these scenes could celebrate youth as a liminal period of grace and potential.

I would propose that these lyrical sequences project a mobile and ontological quality of “skating with” that aligns my retrospectatorship with Jutra’s gaze in a way that confounds notions of subject/object or desire/identification. Dudley Andrew draws on Deleuze to argue that the auteur

“marks the presence of temporality and creativity in the text, including the creativity of emergent thought contributed by the spectator. ... For Deleuze, one exists within the duration and flow of a film, carried by it, but not carried to any given destination” (83).

Deleuze’s time-image sets in relation filmmaker and spectator in a durational flow of time that is characterized by movement, change and meaning that are always indeterminate, never linear, never fixed. And what of the skateboarders themselves? Is there not also something of the embodied subjectivities of Jutra’s teenaged and boy subjects that is carried along in the cinematic flow of time? In a recent interview Marc Harvey, one of the skateboarders featured in *Rouli-roulant*, notes that the teenagers were unaware of the film’s framing narrative of police harassment: “We were proud to do our turns for the camera and that was all. And the surprise was a good one when we saw the film because it was touching, it was well done” (Verreault).

One of Jutra’s lesser known NFB works, *Rouli-roulant* has had a parallel distribution as a cult favourite among skateboarders worldwide. In 2015, Myriam Verreault compiled a short video featuring interviews with Jutra’s collaborators on this film in association with the NFB project *Devil’s Toy Remix* (2014).[7] Editor Werner Nold recalls that *Rouli-roulant* was an informal side project made for fun on the weekends while he and Jutra were editing *Comment savoir*. Nold and Brault (who is credited as cinematographer) recall that they were seen as a crazy and unreliable gang by their English bosses. *Comment savoir* and *Rouli-roulant* contrast like work and play, and the spontaneous latter film recalls *Pierrot des bois*. The tension between institutional normalization and the unhindered youthful possibilities of creativity is almost as suggestive as the figure of youth itself. Verreault’s interviews with Nold and cinematographer Brault reveal a frustration among a group of talented young Francophones working at the Anglophone-dominated NFB. Projecting a youthful disrespect for the norms and rules of a conservative society, *Rouli-roulant* presents not only the first Canadian documentary about skateboarding, but also a sovereignist allegory of the emerging power of youth challenging the status quo in the thick of the Quiet Revolution.

Children in cinematic “worlds”: *Mon oncle Antoine* and *La Dame en couleurs*.

For Castañeda, “the insistent figuration [of the child] plays a unique and constitutive role in the (adult) making of worlds, particularly the worlds of human nature and human culture” (1). I adapt this account to explore the capacity of film

to construct stylized and meaningful fictional worlds (or what Deleuze calls a “milieu”) around the figure of the child. Most audio-visual productions produce meaningful worlds, as we see in Jutra’s shorter works from the romantic artistic freedom of the woods in *Pierrot des bois* to the structured institutional learning environments of *Comment savoir*. In this final section of film analysis, I trace the changing figure of the child in Jutra’s works in the cinematic “worlds” of features *Mon oncle Antoine* and *La Dame en couleurs*. These worlds and the subjects and objects enmeshed in them are poetic and allegorical; they also contain traces of material built worlds and of subjective historical experience.

The most famous child figure in Jutra’s oeuvre is undoubtedly the 15-year-old Benoît in Jutra’s most explicitly “political” film, *Mon oncle Antoine*. Financed by the NFB, the film is set in the town of Black Lake in the Eastern Townships where French Canadian asbestos miners are exploited by an English mine owner. Based on the childhood memories of Clément Perron (who co-wrote the script with Jutra), the film bears the imprint of direct cinema with its casting of local people (including Jacques Gagnon who plays Benoît) alongside seasoned actors. The opening shots of the asbestos mines are anchored by an intertitle: “In the country of Québec in the asbestos region not so long ago.” This subtitle and the opening scene depicting Jos Poulin’s disgruntlement with the English mine bosses reference the bitter Asbestos strike of 1949; this strike is widely seen as a turning point of Québec history and a precursor to the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. The economic power relations of the mining town are crystallized in the scene where the English mine owner announces that there will be no wage increase in the new year just before he drives through town in a horse and carriage throwing candies to the children.



Mon oncle Antoine (1971): Establishing shots of asbestos mines and the town of Black Lake, Québec.

The opening shots of *Mon oncle Antoine* efficiently establish a cinematic world through a series of establishing shots of the mines as well as recurring emphatic long shots that zoom into the Catholic Church, an imposing building that looms over the town’s other modest buildings. To the sound of tolling church bells, Jutra transports the viewer into rural Québec society of the *Grande noirceur*, still dominated by the English economic interests and repressive Catholic social and sexual norms. The narrative centered on Benoît unfolds over twenty-four hours from the morning of Christmas Eve. The film recounts a series of vignettes that unfold in and around the General Store, the town’s commercial and social hub. Owned by middle-aged couple Antoine and Cécile, the General Store houses an informal gathering of the townspeople on Christmas Eve after the miners return from work: a young couple announces their engagement; the glamorous notary’s wife causes a stir as she arrives at the store to try on a custom-made corset; Cécile leads a traditional song and all of the townspeople join in. And later that evening, the store that also offers an undertaker service receives a call announcing the death of Marcel Poulin, a fifteen-year old who lives in a remote village

We are introduced to Benoît, the film’s lead character, who acts as altar boy at a funeral for an asbestos worker who has succumbed to the effects of twenty-five years in the mine. This scene establishes a pattern where Benoît is frequently both participant and witness. Under Benoît’s watchful gaze, his uncle Antoine and Fernand (a sleazy middle-aged clerk at the store played by Jutra) act as undertakers. The men prepare the body for burial, forcefully disentangling a rosary from the stiff fingers of a corpse, and removing a false shirtfront from the body before closing the coffin. All the while, Fernand whistles cheerfully until Antoine asks him to stop. Here, Jutra cuts back and forth between the undertakers and long takes of Benoît who watches them intently from across the room. Situated in small-town Québec during the *Grande noirceur*, this is a cinematic world of sly sidelong glances, irreverence, feigned piety, false appearances, and sexual innuendo.

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Benoît's intent gaze captured by the camera in *Mon oncle Antoine*.



Peeping Tom: Benoît and another teenager spy on a woman trying on a corset.

Benoît, an orphan, lives with and works for his uncle Antoine who owns the General Store. If Benoît's point of view is often privileged, the boy is also frequently framed in close-up or medium shots. With *Mon oncle Antoine*, Jutra develops a layered and complex play of the mobile cinematic gaze. While Benoît's intent and impassive gaze is often foregrounded in close up and medium shots, the boy's point of view is intercut with the gaze of the sleazy bachelor Fernand played by Jutra himself. Like the eponymous hero of *Léolo* (Jean-Claude Lauzon 1992) and Manon of *Les bons débarras* [*Good Riddance*] (Francis Mankiewicz 1980), Benoît is one of what Bill Marshall describes as the "perverse children" of Québec cinema (116). In this coming of age tale, the teenaged hero is at once naïve, rebellious, and in a process of sexual and social awakening. I now turn to three key scenes that flesh out different dimensions of this mobile gaze in the allegorical cinematic world of *À tout prendre*.

The pedagogy of *Mon oncle Antoine* is one where teenagers fend for themselves in a colonized society where the adults are unable to show a good example. Benoît is repeatedly framed observing his uncle's steady consumption of hard liquor and his aunt flirting both with her husband Antoine and with Fernand. In one classic sequence, Benoît and another teenaged boy peer through a crack in the door to watch a beautiful and inaccessible young woman trying on a corset in a makeshift changing room on the second floor. This scene marks one of several "peeping Tom" moments that culminate in the scene where Benoît stumbles across Fernand in bed with his aunt. These scenes of flirting and illicit sexuality recur in a filmic world where the omnipresent and repressive power of the Catholic Church watches all-powerful over all manner of transgressions and guilty secrets.

Just prior to a second more troubling scene, we learn that the teenaged Carmen has been left by her family with the childless couple Antoine and Cécile to work in the store. In a sequence framed through Fernand's point of view Carmen's father makes an annual visit to collect the girl's wages for the year. Amidst the merriment at the General Store on Christmas Eve, it is Fernand who witnesses the girl's grief and dejection and who prompts Antoine and Cécile to adopt the girl.



Carmen and Benoît: an innocent flirtation under Fernand's (and Jutra's) watchful eye.

Always watching the teenagers, Fernand also witnesses an ongoing flirtation between Benoît and Carmen. In the scene that interests me here, Benoît chases Carmen among the coffins that are stored upstairs in the General store. Benoît catches her and they fall down on the floor together, the boy on top. The two teenagers are framed in a medium shot as Benoît clumsily puts his hand on Carmen's breast, then we cut to a close-up of the girl's face, weeping. A playful scene of flirtation shifts rapidly to the girl's deep distress in a powerful moment of conflicting emotions.

Carmen stands up abruptly and Benoît is startled by a creaking sound, and a shot from his point of view reveals Fernand on the stairs, watching them. By insisting on Fernand's creepy gaze, Jutra transposes an innocuous moment of flirtation and sexual exploration between teenagers into a complex intersubjective dynamic of voyeurism. Fernand's motivation for watching the teenagers is unclear. If *Jeunesses musicales* privileges a young boy's direct and almost provocative gaze, *Mon oncle Antoine* pulls back to reveal a middle-aged man watching. And eight years after *À tout prendre*, Jutra once again casts himself as a "bastard" whose erotic sensibility confounds the norms of the *Grande noirceur*, and also very possibly the comfort zone of period of the film's production in the early 1970s.



Benoît and Antoine on the long carriage ride to pick up a body.

I now turn to the film's powerful final scene. The story of the Pilon family unfolds in parallel with the action at the General Store, where Jos Pilon who expressed his dissatisfaction with the mine in the opening scene leaves his family to work in the woods; as he bids goodbye to the children, the father promises his oldest son Marcel that he will send him to school the following year. It is the fifteen-year-old Marcel Pilon who dies on Christmas Eve, and Benoît accompanies his uncle on a horse-drawn sleigh through the snowy countryside on Christmas Eve to pick up the body. During the return trip, the coffin containing the boy's body falls off the carriage, but Antoine is too drunk to help the boy load the coffin back onto the carriage. On Christmas morning, Benoît and Fernand retrace the journey of the previous night but are unable to locate the missing coffin. The film concludes on a long take framing Benoît's intent gaze in close-up that holds on a freeze frame as the credits roll. The boy looks through a frosted window into the Pilon family



Christmas morning: the pietà takes the place of the crèche.

farmhouse, only to discover that the coffin containing Marcel's body has been found abandoned in the snow by the boy's father, Jos. Ian Lockerbie describes this poignant sequence as a biblical scene that reverses the symbolism of Christmas, "a pietà rather than a birth and a cradle" where the "coffin replaces the crib, and death [takes the place of] life" (49).

Benoît's coming of age story in *Mon oncle Antoine* is widely read as incarnating the emergence of the modern nation. In a film that returns to the *Grande noirceur* from the only just "modern" vantage point of the Quiet Revolution in 1971, the youthful figure of Benoît embodies the possibility of change to come. Christian Poirier offers a classic reading of the film where the film's ineffectual adults represent a people unable to effect change in an oppressive colonial context; examples include Antoine's inability to help Benoît retrieve the fallen coffin, or the hesitation by Antoine and Cécile to adopt Carmen.

"Through the development of Benoît (an orphan), the filmmaker shows that Québec society can free itself of its past (religion, the English boss, and parental authority are all toppled from their pedestals). ... Not identifying with the available models of identity, Benoît must create his own identity in a space emptied of intersubjectivity" (Poirier 131).

Lockerbie reads the film's closing image in this way:

"Each spectator knows from the power of the Benoît's last look – prolonged into a still image – that he has triumphed over the general lack of awareness that he shared at the beginning of the film" (49).



The world through childlike eyes: the final shot of *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971).

And yet, these readings do not fully capture the complex *mise en scène* of the gaze, of responsibility and death of this final scene. Standing behind the coffin like the Virgin Mary beside the crèche, Madame Poulin is the only member of the bereaved family to see Benoît at the window and to return his gaze. This character embodies the suffering and the endurance of French Canadian women who historically bore and lost many children in poverty, and her returned gaze is stoic, unreadable. She may see Benoît, the undertaker's assistant, as partly responsible

for the loss of her son's body in the snow. And yet, as many critics have argued, Benoît is the same age as the deceased Marcel, and the two boys can be seen as doubles with two very different fates. This is a world of hardship and hard labour of a people under the thumb of the English boss and the Catholic Church. In this world, children die young without education (Marcel Pilon), or they make their own way in the world as orphans (Benoît) or abandoned by their parents (Carmen).

Fernand, played by Jutra himself, is present in this final scene yet absent from the evocative freeze-frame that concludes the film. Here, Jutra positions himself as part of an ineffectual adult generation, a lascivious and sleazy bachelor who seduces his boss's wife and spies on the sexual explorations of teenagers. The small town life of the late 1940s depicted so brilliantly by Jutra in *Mon oncle Antoine* may well invite an allegory of the emerging nation, but this "perverse" coming of age tale also depicts an intimate world brimming with secrets, guilt, and non-normative desires and sexuality. Benoît and occasionally Fernand are the key bearers of the look in this film, but they take part in a relay of ambiguous gazes – desire, voyeurism, identification, sympathy, empathy, antipathy – among an ensemble cast of characters, professional actors and locals of Black Lake.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

La Dame en couleurs (Our Lady of the Paints)



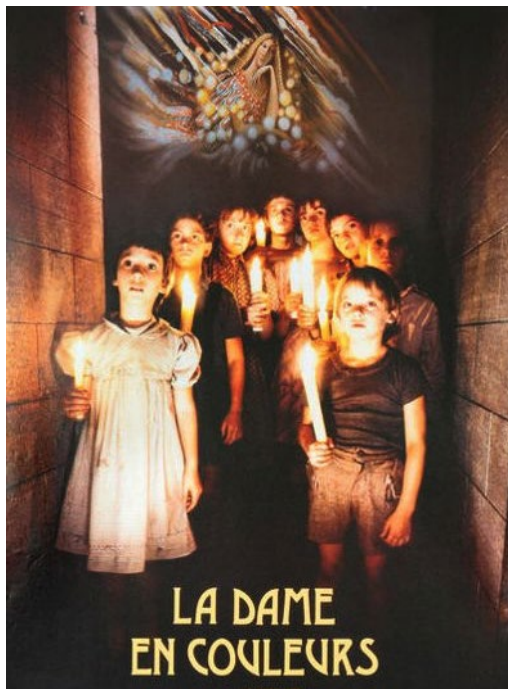
The orphans of *La Dame en couleurs*: Denis with one of the mental patients, and a small group of children taking the body of the dead boy Sébastien downstairs into the tunnel.

The first film that Jutra directed in Québec since *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire* (1975), *La Dame en couleurs* marked the filmmaker's return to Québec after almost a decade of "exile" in English Canada. It was also Jutra's last film. By all accounts, the film shoot was difficult as Jutra's memory was failing at the time. Following on from the cinematic "worlds" of *Comment savoir*, *Rouli-roulant* and especially the 1976 telefilm *Dreamspeaker*, *La Dame en couleurs* develops a much more pessimistic and unconventional exploration of children enmeshed in normative institutional settings. Based on a dream of Louise Rinfret who co-wrote the script with Jutra, the historical setting of *La Dame en couleurs* is indeterminate, and many critics comment that the film reworks recurring themes in Jutra's oeuvre including children, the figure of the artist, madness, and institutions as micro-systems of power and normalization (Leach 230-244; Dorland).

In the opening sequence of *La Dame en couleurs*, a truckload of children is delivered like so many potatoes to a large and unspecified institutional building. In this film framed from the point of view of an ensemble cast of children, we learn from their exchanges that there was no room for them in the orphanage. As the children are ushered into the building by nuns, a mentally disturbed man dressed in a house coat appears from the side of the building, pursued by orderlies who forcibly bring him back inside. Here, we understand at the same time as the children that this is a mental institution, a place of confinement. Next, the newcomers meet the resident children who perform menial tasks: laundry, transporting and serving food, and caring for the patients. In this gloomy environment, Jutra deftly directs the ensemble child cast to bring out the loneliness of the orphans who long for families and their desire to learn in a sparse setting where no education is offered. Fragile yet equipped with a certain collective resilience, the children are mostly left to their own devices to play together, roaming the long corridors and dodging the mentally ill and the hurried nuns.

Like *Comment savoir*, Jutra's last film foregrounds children in an institutional cinematic "world," but with *La Dame en couleurs* we are legions away from the earlier documentary's confident discourse of modernity and progress. As in *Mon oncle Antoine* and *Dreamspeaker*, the orphans must rely on their wits rather than on the adults around them to survive. In contrast with the solitary heroes Benôit and Peter (*Dreamspeaker*) however, the children develop a certain solidarity. The cinematic world of the asylum in *La Dame en couleurs* is a place of barely contained chaos, where the provisional order maintained by nuns, security guards and doctors is always about to fall apart, leaving the mental patients and the children running pell mell for the door. This is a place of neglect, where a young boy named Sébastien dies due to lack of medical care and the medical personnel try to cover up their error.

Yet this repressive institutional world connects, here and there, to a parallel world of underground tunnels. A small group of children discovers this mysterious and magical realm, which initially seems to offer a utopic alternative to the above ground asylum. The children recover the body of the boy who died due to medical neglect, and devise their own pagan rituals of mourning for an orphan whose death was to be hidden and left unmourned in the adult world. The children express their desire to learn about the outside world from snippets of magazine read aloud by Agnès, the only literate one of the group. The tunnels also offer a space removed from the sexual repression of the Catholic Church, where the



La Dame en couleurs: A magical parallel world of underground tunnels.



Visionary artist? Jutra beside "Our lady of our Paints" in a production still from *La Dame en couleurs*

children can spontaneously explore their sexuality. Meanwhile, an epileptic painter named Barbouilleux (translating roughly as "smudger") follows the children into their underworld, using the blank concrete walls as canvases. This mad visionary paints a series of frescoes, including "the Lady of Colours" of the film's title, "a symbolic Ur-Mother for the orphans, a goddess/idol for this underground kingdom" (Dorland 27).

At first, the children imitate the painter, drawing and painting in the tunnels, but they come to resent the adult intruder, and give him a strong dose of poison. We do not learn of Barbouilleux's ultimate fate due to the film's sketchy continuity and narrative development, but the children's malevolent intent is clear. Barbouilleux the disturbed visionary, an adult who fits neither in the asylum nor in the outside world, is sacrificed as retribution for the dead boy. It is with the attack on the visionary painter that the underground world is revealed as a terrifying double of the violent and repressive above ground asylum. Jutra co-wrote the role of Barbouilleux with the firm intention of playing the part, but the film's producer Pierre Lamy categorically refused because of the filmmaker's declining memory. In *Mon oncle Antoine*, Jutra cast himself as a lascivious "queer" voyeur, while in *La Dame en couleurs* he projects himself into the role of a visionary artist, the children's ally, who falls victim to their violence.

To this point I have explored the mobility of the gaze, desire and identification in some of Jutra's earlier films. Produced much later than the other works, *La Dame en couleurs* explores the mobile subject positions of abuser and victim, rather than the reversible viewing positions of subject and object. Returning to the film in light of the recent Jutra affair, it is troubling to see Jutra dramatizing his own fictive death at the hands of children who have been neglected and abused. *La Dame en couleurs* stages a strange reversal of the positions of aggressor and victim; the film's generalized violence seems almost to be the inevitable outcome in a doubled cinematic world of sexual repression, neglect and abuse. Near the end of the film Barbouilleux, who suffers from epilepsy, makes a statement that seems to encapsulate Jutra's frame of mind at the time: "I am sick. Sometimes, everything stops around me and all of a sudden I find myself covered with blood in a place that I don't know, all alone. There is no one on my side, neither up above nor here. All that I want is a little peace."

La Dame en couleurs also stands out as the only film by Jutra to directly dramatize a relationship of desire between an adult and a teenager, but interestingly this dynamic is explored through a relationship between the teenaged Agnès and a nun, Sister Gertrude (played by Paule Baillargeon). It is Agnès who pursues Sister Gertrude, but the attraction seems to be reciprocal. In



her private lessons with the nun, the girl gazes longingly at Sister Gertrude and reads her love poetry aloud. Under the watchful eyes of the other nuns, Agnès pursues Gertrude, insisting that “there is nothing wrong” with their feelings for one another. The nun struggles to keep her composure, continually rejecting Agnès’s advances. Finally, Agnès explores her sexuality with another orphan, Denis, in the children’s parallel underground world.



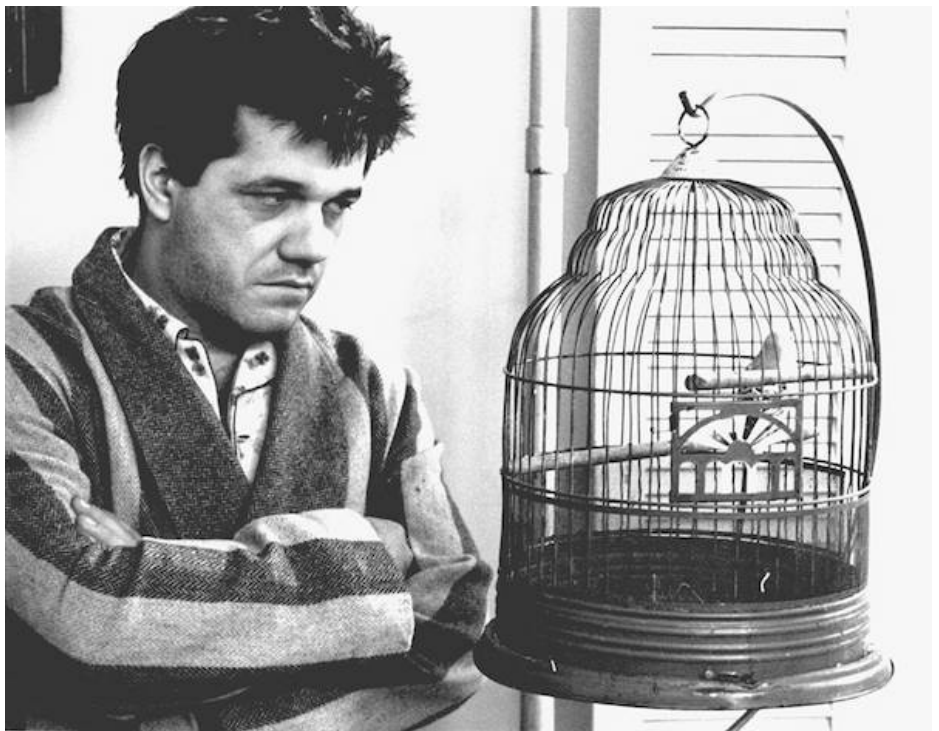
Forbidden desire: Agnès (Charlotte Laurier) and Sister Gertrude (Paule Baillargeon).

The film’s concluding sequences are extraordinarily dark. Several of the orphans who have found the underground world escape from the institution to the resounding and desolate cry of “Where are we going?” Agnès, however, is afraid to leave, terrified at the prospect of life outside the institution. Meanwhile, Sister Gertrude, believing that Agnès has escaped, removes her religious garb to don her secular clothes and leaves the institution with a determined step, presumably in search of her young love. The film’s devastating dénouement depicts Agnès as a middle-aged woman still confined in the asylum but now one of the mentally ill. In this thoroughly dystopic cinematic world, we only catch a brief glimpse of the “lady of colours,” and it seems that not even the vivid colours of Barbouilleux’s frescoes can offer a glimmer of hope.

Jutra was losing his memory during the shoot of *La Dame en couleurs*, and the film’s vague historical anchorage and dreamlike, even surrealistic qualities resist a clear historical anchorage. The cinematic world of *La Dame en couleurs* has been read as a metaphor for Québec society four years after the defeat of the first referendum for sovereignty. Nathalie Petrowski writes in 1985 that

“the psychiatric institution inhabited by orphans and the mentally ill ... is a Québec that has not yet been liberated from the Church. It is the convent of a collective childhood stuck between a desire for liberty and a great fear of the unknown” (82).

More recently, the film has been read in reference to the tragic episode of *les orphelins de Duplessis* (the Duplessis orphans) during the *Grande noirceur*. Between 1930 and 1964, several thousands of illegitimate or orphaned children left to the care of the state were brought up under terrible conditions in institutions controlled by Catholic religious orders.[8] This scandal of the Duplessis orphans was first brought to light in the 1960s when the practice of interning orphans was ended. With its sensitive account of children’s experience and its evocative cinematic world, Jutra’s final film smudges (or “barbouille”) clean lines between socio-historical events, biography and fiction, between children and adults.



Confinement (*La Dame en couleurs*).

Conclusion

This essay pieces together diverse episodes from Jutra's life and works from the vantage-point of the present, in light of the revelation of the filmmaker's "open secret" of intergenerational desire. I found it important from the outset to articulate a clear and coherent ethical position in relation to existing evidence of Jutra's non-consensual sexual relations with a small number of pre-pubescent boys. In the body of the essay, however, I set out neither to condemn nor to defend Jutra, but rather to delve into what it was about the Jutra affair that so profoundly destabilized Québec society. Part of the response to this question, I argue, lies in the ways that Jutra has been perceived as a foundational figure. In my genealogical analysis of the evolving Jutra myth, I demonstrate how the filmmaker has often been understood as a potent figure of origin for (homo)sexual liberation and expression, and for Québec modern cinema of the Quiet revolution. Deploying theories of queer time, I bring into relief how the "arrested development" of Jutra as a foundational figure of Quebec society confounds teleological discourses of development and progress used to measure individual lives and careers as well as nations.

Alongside the evolving myth surrounding the compelling figure of Jutra, I explore the changing meanings and discourses surrounding the "figure of the child" in a number of Jutra's films and in his highly mediated public persona. Following trails of breadcrumbs left by scholars, critics and those close to Jutra, as well as Jutra himself, I seek clues to Jutra's troubling proximity to children. With this essay, I don't seek to discover the truth or the core identity of Jutra, but rather to trace the discursive construction of the filmmaker in relation to the potent but inherently mutable symbol of the child. The discourse that male homosexuality is associated with "arrested development" measured against a norm of heterosexual masculine virility has particular resonance in Québec (Schwartzwald). In the case of Jutra, an avowed "childlike" quality performed so brilliantly in the 1956 short *Pierrot des bois*, reinforces a perception of Jutra's queerness, of a suspect or perverse masculinity. Here, once again, I find that queer theory offers powerful insights into the Jutra affair. Stockton reminds us how moral panics have frequently fixated on homosexual "influence" or sexual predilection for children. Referring to a powerful and historically specific romantic discourse around the

sentimental fixation on the innocence of children, this author argues that the child as figure of purity conjures its opposite, violence and sexual depravation. What is so troubling about the Jutra affair, I suggest, is the “revelation” or the suggestion of an erotic proximity between the mythic queer auteur and the figure of the child, both the ideal projection of the child and actual flesh and blood children.

At the beginning of the essay, I allude to other sexual scandals surrounding important cultural figures such as Woody Allen, Roman Polanski, and Michael Jackson. In Québec, a parallel example includes the revelation that Guy Cloutier, manager of 1970s and 1980s child stars Nathalie and René Simard, had sexually abused Nathalie Simard as a child. This essay may offer certain insights into how we might begin to understand the production of cultural meanings around these highly public cases. Notably, I explore the possibilities of sexuality studies for understanding how “cultural constructed formations of nation and sexuality are defined and understood in relation to one another” (31). The insights of sexuality studies facilitate my conjunctural reading of the Jutra affair framed in relation to specific and changing discourses of sexuality, gender and nation. However, I hope to have demonstrated some of the dangers of aligning different scales of discourse and experience (the individual and the nation) through my critique of Lever and other veiled homophobic commentaries surrounding Jutra’s immaturity.

Bill Marshal notes that frameworks of “the national” and “national identity” as a (master) reading of film texts are “ever provisional, historically contingent, ceaselessly elaborated constructions, and yet at some level they are inescapable” (1-2). Further, I would argue, these constructions of nation and national identity also tend to be projected onto filmmakers, particularly those associated with “minor” cinemas. Part of the interest of an ethical queer thought here is an insistence on specificity. Notably, it is essential to untangle what we know of Jutra’s recriminatory and unconsensual sexual contact with boys and teenagers from normative sovereignist projections onto Jutra the individual, whether they amount to a tragic romantic over-valuation or an unrelenting account of failure. Queer thought is useful here once again for tracing the profound affective ambivalence surrounding Jutra as a historical queer figure.

Recent queer interest in negativity dredges up negative, unattractive, ambivalent and unappealing “queer” affective and corporeal sensations commonly pushed to the sidelines of normative collective and individual identities, intimacies, and desires. Shadowed by the stigma of perverse sexuality and “failed” queer masculinity, the figure of Jutra profoundly disturbs an insistence on a teleological movement of progress or liberation shared by the Québec sovereignty movement and gay liberation. As noted above, in Québec these modern movements share a common “origin” in the Quiet Revolution. Pre-liberation queer sexuality and subjectivity, according to Love, summons up profound feelings of shame, backwardness, pain and loss that are firmly relegated to the past in the name of a progressive movement of gay liberation. Jutra as a queer figure summons up the shame and taboo of non-normative, “damned” sexuality that haunts the newfound legitimacy of Québec lesbians and gay men as full sexual citizens. Could it be that the *Grande noirceur*, widely seen as a period of backwardness and shame, evokes a related structure of feeling in a “modern” Québec?

In this light, it is fitting to finish with *La Dame en couleurs* and the shameful historical phenomenon of the Duplessis orphans. Widely dismissed by many critics in Québec at the time of its release as being too “dark,” *La Dame en couleurs* referred indirectly to the shameful episode of the *orphelins de Duplessis* that only became the subject of broader public debate in the early 1990s. In this practice that encapsulates the corruption and false piety of the *Grande noirceur*, the administration of Maurice Duplessis skimmed off Canadian federal money designated for care of children who were wards of the state; in the process, these children were abandoned without additional resources to the less than tender mercies of existing Catholic institutions, including mental asylums. *La Dame en couleurs* points to the tragic ongoing effects on the orphans, who were exploited

as child labour in these institutions, who received no formal education, and some of whom like the fictional Agnès ended up being interned, in turn, in mental institutions.

Returning to the 2016 scandal, journalist André Gagnon points out the tremendous hypocrisy of the “Jutra affair.” Prefacing his commentary with an account of his experience of sexual abuse as a child at the hands of his uncle, Gagnon notes how Jutra as a visible and queer individual is singled out for a public disgrace. Meanwhile, he argues, many other heterosexual male politicians or clergy who routinely abused children and adults have kept their pride of place in public space. By way of example, Gagnon points to the statue of Québec premier Maurice Duplessis that remains in front of Québec’s Assemblée nationale, despite his proven responsibility for the horrific treatment of thousands of orphans. And yet, in another very recent example, the Montréal municipal government announced that it would change the name of Amherst Street named for a British officer and colonial administrator; the reason for this change of street name is that Amherst advocated the genocide of First Nations people by distributing blankets infected with smallpox after the British conquest of New France.

This commentary broadens out the discussion, while bringing me full circle to the profound ethical dilemmas raised by the Jutra affair. How can we measure and judge the respective “harm” caused by different oppressive, violent or damaging acts across time? In my mind, the affective resonance of the Jutra affair is clearly connected to the potent charge attributed to sexuality, particularly “perverse” sexuality in Western culture. And yet, the important queer critique of a retrospective moral panic put forward by several authors in this special section could reasonably be countered by the argument that the rapid official response demonstrates the impact of feminism in bringing to light the seriousness and lasting harm of sexual violence. To conclude, I can’t affirm with full conviction that Jutra’s name should or should not have been dislodged from its place of pride in Québec. As a feminist and a queer thinker dubious of cultural canons and of how myths tend to cohere around “great white men,” I am convinced of the importance of recent public debates that are taking place in Québec around Jutra and other controversial historical figures.

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Notes

1. After the story of “Jean” was made public, the *Sûreté du Québec* (the province’s provincial police) announced that they would be interested in hearing the alleged victim’s story in order to explore the possibility of laying civil charges seeking compensation from the filmmaker’s estate. To date, “Jean” has chosen not to come forward (Larouche).

2. This committee included retired judge Suzanne Coupal, psychiatrist Jocelyn Aubut, ethicist René Villemure, and filmmaker Charles Binamé.

2a. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of French-language sources are by the author.

3. It is interesting to note that Noguez explores a man’s love for a young boy with his 2013 novel *Une année qui commence bien*. It is more than possible that the writer’s perceptive early commentaries about Jutra were informed by his shared erotic sensibilities.

4. This comment refers to Jutra’s famous “confession” to loving “boys” in *À tout prendre*, a point taken up in detail in the essays by Waugh and Rodríguez-Arbolez Jr.

5. I would like to thank Frédéric Moffet for directing my attention to this fascinating sequence.

6. As an aside, it is interesting to note that Marcel Carné’s 1945 masterpiece *Enfants du paradis* was banned from Québec theatres as part of a routine film censorship during the 1940s and 1950s. Carné’s film features the brilliant Arletty, an unmarried woman who has affairs with three men in the course of the film. Comments by a priest who also acted as a censor indicate the repressive sexual mores of the period: “In the first half of the film, there is the beginning of a liaison. If they are not severely punished in the second half, the film won’t pass” (Siroka). As a confirmed cinephile from his teenage years, Jutra was undoubtedly aware of this ban, which caused an international incident.

7. Initiated by Hugues Sweeney, the interactive documentary *Devil’s Toy Remix* features skateboarders from all around the world.

8. The care provided was rudimentary in these institutions run by the Catholic Church, the discipline very severe, and the children were often victims of neglect, violence, or sexual abuse. Deprived of a proper education, some of these children were labelled as insane or mentally retarded, and placed in asylums where they grew up alongside the mentally ill, adults with severe cognitive disabilities, and other interned populations. Under the direction of medical personnel, a number of children received barbarous treatments normally reserved for the mentally ill: electroshock, isolation, excessive medication. Some of the children were retained in these institutions as adults (Van de Sande and Boudreau 121-122).

9. The orphans mounted a class action suit in 1992 against the Québec government on the basis that they had been legal wards of the state and their

treatment had been sanctioned by Duplessis, the Québec premier of the period. They did not receive any compensation until the early 2000s.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

"Fix yer tie."

An ekphrastic reply to Jutra's ekleipsis

A visual poem by [John Greyson](#)



- Ekphrasty is the creation of poems based on works on art.
- Ekleipsis is Greek for both disappearance and eclipse.

In Jutra's masterpiece *Mon Oncle Antoine*, the first words 15-year-old smart-aleck Benoit speaks to the 40-year-old bachelor bumpkin Fernand (played by Jutra) are: "Fix yer tie." Ergo, in the wake of the Jutra scandal, when overnight new cadres of witch hunters sought to disappear and eclipse his legacy from our national landscape, this image-text poem adopts the tactics of Ekphrasty, using scraps from Jutra's body of work as actor and auteur to speak back to Quebec's McCarthys. This poem will take the form of two journeys: by mouse and by sleigh. (The mouse will impersonate a porcupine, while the sleigh will double as a dumpster.)

The day after the Jutra scandal broke, vandals graffittied

his memorial statue in Montreal's Parc Claude Jutra with the words Pépé Pédo – Grandpa Kiddie Diddler. The Bolex head atop the brutalist concrete base now wears a red cravat of opprobrium, which could also be translated as: "Fix yer tie."



The day before, he was Saint Claude, patron of Quebec's insurrectional, independent cinema, celebrated for his passionate films celebrating youthful rebellion. Consider this typical appreciation by an anonymous fan, posted on youtube in 2011, which freely ekphrasts on his oeuvre, mashing up Paule Baillargeon's doc *Claude Jutra: An Unfinished Story* with clips of Jutra's own work, most notably his early experimental home movies and the ecstatic *Dreamspeaker* intergenerational skinnydipping scene with a native elder and an 11-year-old boy.

From Baillargeon's doc: "

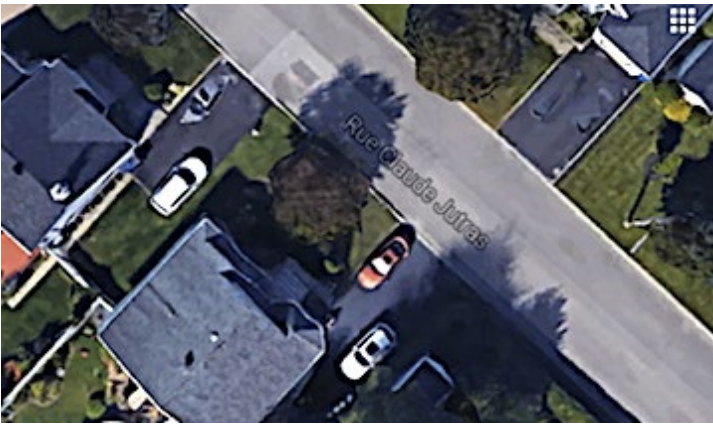
"He wanted to remain a child—his way of directing, his way of behaving, his fault to a certain extent was to stay a child, to look at the world through childlike eyes, to be able to see a butterfly for the first time, or an emotion or a tragedy for the first time, without cynicism.""



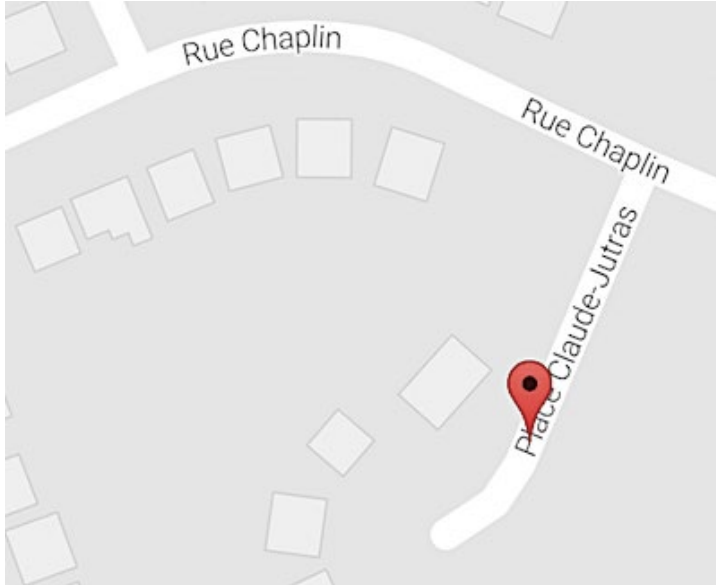


This celebration of Jutra's passionate identification with children has now been eclipsed and rewritten by the obliterating if familiar shadows of witchhunt outrage, of hypocritical scandal, of P  p   P  do. Overnight, Canada's carefree Peter Pan has been jekyll-and-hyded into a monstrous Qu  b  cois Captain Hook. Overnight, much of our establishment reacts with the same self-aggrandizing performance of shock, horror and disgust that the graffitists deployed, earnestly promising to de-Jutrafy the nation, stripping his name from every rue, parc,   cole and Quebec's own Oscars. Fix yer tie.

Our first journey begins courtesy of a mac mouse, google-mapping a squeaky journey around the province, seeking those remaining streets that still bear his name.

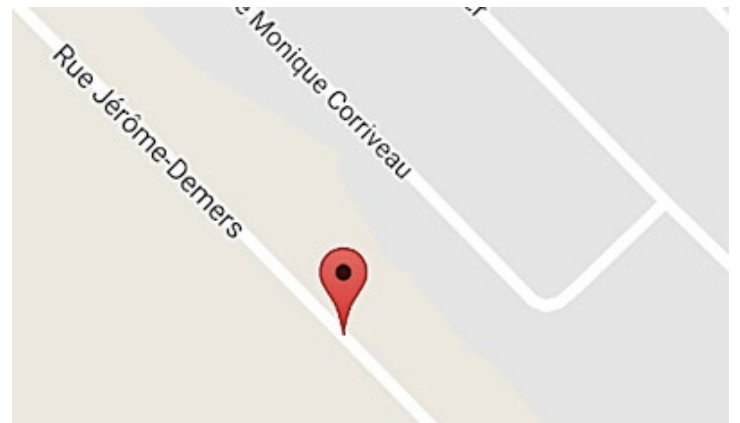


But wait: a day after my mouse found this cul de sac that t-bones Rue Chaplin in the suburb of Repentigny, google maps itself has removed the name of Claude. Repentigny roughly translates as repentance.



Here in the Saint Nicholas sector of Levis, the town council renamed rue Claude Jutra with the name of 19th century priest Jerome-Demers. Remember, St. Nicholas is patron saint of archers, brewers, pawnbrokers... and children.

My squeaky mouse tours us through a melancholy archive of eclipsed signs, a graveyard of instagram infamy, a troubling map of our smug outraged amnesia. These street names may be physically erased from public view but digitally live on as this witchhunt's necessary return of the repressed. Fix yer tie.





It's apposite that Jutra's early portraits of rebellious youth like those in *Devil's Toy* and *Knowing to Learn* (both from 1966) are more often than not staged in these self-same streets and rues and parcs and cul de sacs, public spaces of agency and flight.

While his story-telling techniques haven't dated so well (the NFB's house-style of overreaching ironic voice-over is particularly cringe-worthy), there's no denying the joy his camera takes in the passionate faces and bodies of the teen skateboarders of *Toy* or the anti-war demonstrators of *Learn*.



Our google mouse journey concludes on squeaky streets that once reverberated with chants for change, but are now strangely silent.

Our sleigh journey commences in a blizzard, in the final act of *Mon Oncle Antoine*, with Benoit and Fernand wrapped in furs, embodying yet another irreverent intergenerational dialogue as staged by Jutra: the mouthy teen and hapless bachelor, struggling to see.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Fix yer tie.

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In this Ekphrastic remake of *Mon Oncle Antoine*, they are going from town to town, collecting the eclipsed street signs in their empty coffin. The task is funereal, the mood somber.

They meditate on the boys of *Wow*, Jutra's hybrid and somewhat awkward symphonic cinempoem. This naked teen runs through the streets of Montreal. Back in 1966, he was searching cheerfully for reaction; now he searches vainly for the name of Jutra on a sign. He has fixed his outrageous silver tie.



But now, in the aftermath of the scandal, *Wow*'s jogger (like *Dreamspeaker*'s skinnydippers and *Devils* skateboarders), has been jekyll'n'hyded by this moral eclipse. Before: we could see through their sweaty brows and young buttocks to narrative themes of social unrest, even if the execution was un peu clunky and the insights de trop banal. Bien sur, these lads were objects – that's what a camera does best— but also, against the odds, agents. Now, when we watch post-scandal, we can only see Jutra himself, leering at them through his Zeiss lenses – a reverse telescopic interpolation of a one-dimensional pépé pédo.



Wow concludes with an unforgettable scene, and one which on the surface would seem to confirm not just Jutra's self-proclaimed enchantment with childhood, but every witch hunter's worst nightmare. Over the course of five minutes and some melancholic Satie noodling, an eight-year-old boy in underwear frolics on the floor with a sleepy porcupine. It's a scene that exists in extreme isolation, with no voice-over and no attempt to explain or justify how it relates to the other set pieces of *Wow* (the joggers, the weed-smokers).



Post-scandal, this scene seems tailor-made to serve as bait or fodder for a latter-day Anita 'Save the Children' Bryant moral panic, and with the public debate reaching an hysterical pitch, we're told we must embrace the binary and choose sides: Pépé Pédo or Saint Claude of the Butterflies. Yet the poignant enigma of this porky encounter between boy and beast, flesh and quills, seems for me, against the odds, to slyly and quietly evade the relentless shadow of the eclipse. But am I being naive, idealistic? For today's knowing eyes, can a boy and porcupine, together, see a butterfly for the first time?

Benoit and Fernand continue to bicker in the blizzard, making their way from town to town. They speak about

Equally, feminists have acquired much expertise fighting back against apologists who claim get-out-of-jail-free cards for persecuted artistes-on-pedestals such

the logic of a witch hunt, which by necessity must traffic in binaries of wolf and lamb, abuser and abused, Hook and Pan. Queer activists in Quebec and Ontario over many decades have become adept at unpacking and contesting the agendas of such scandals, from Emanuel Jacques and the Body Politic “Men Loving Boys Loving Men” trials of the 80s, to London Ontario’s 1995 kiddie porn scandal and the recent Rev. Brent Hawkes acquittal for gross indecency.



Here’s Jutra as seductive clown in one of his best-known outings, *A Chairy Tale* (1957) where the stop-motion games of he and fellow-queer co-conspirator Norman MacLaren disregard any need for euphemism.



as Woody and Roman. We’ve learned essential lessons, enshrined in a commitment to messy nuance: (1) insist on naming the continuums, the contradictions and the performances of desire, consent, agency; (2) expose the investments and agendas (cops, social workers, the media) who predictably exploit witch hunts for gain; (3) following Aries, Foucault, and Sedgwick, deconstruct the fixed categoric binaries of adult and child, refusing pedestals for either.



Indeed, when I remade *Chairy* as one of my shot-for-shot safer sex shorts in 1989, I found their clothed version somehow more explicit than my naked one.

In *Opening Speech* (1961), McLaren’s even more suggestive sequel, he struggles with an outrageously tumescent microphone during an awards ceremony. This prescient short seems to anticipate Jutra’s 1972 refusal of the Order of Canada (he was a principled Quebec separatist) and the post-scandal stripping of his name from both the Canadian Screen Best First Feature Award, and the annual Prix Jutra. Our complacent Canadian film establishment may be all too happy to maple-wash his separatism, yet it seems we still must eclipse the polymorphishness of his images. Equally, his defenders fall into the trap of seeking to restore Saint Claude’s halo, yet surely he should be interesting to us because he was such a messy, uneven, warty artist.



Their coffin is overflowing, and there are still more towns to visit. Benoit and Fernand are cranky, saying “I can’t see, I don’t know”. With each sign, another of the available, complex Jutras disappears from view. Jutra the perpetual child. Jutra whose own struggles with depression and suicide he described freely. Jutra whose extraordinary childhood was filled with happiness. Jutra who lived and breathed his unflinching engagement with the varied erotic hues that colour our worlds, intergenerational and otherwise. Jutra, whose complexities were lurking like a porcupine in plain sight.

If I was to write a Ekphrastic poem about a work of Jutra’s art, I would choose this boy and this porcupine, and their enigmatic pas de deux on the black and white floorboards of a summer afternoon, with all the cicadas and tides and tumbling shadows that repudiate fixed meanings, that drench and retrench, surge in and wash out. I’d attempt to Ekphrasticize the smugness of a society still seemingly hooked on moral panics and culture wars, still jacked up on the alibis of absolutes. A society that marauds, that stacks up a pyre of names in an effort to burn down babel, even as we perform our utter inability to ekphrast actual lived intergenerational sexualities, young or old. The butterfly is missing and the porcupine weeps. Unfix your tie.



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



À tout prendre: an introduction

by [Thomas Waugh](#)

Launched in April 1963, with its American commercial debut in English two years later, *À tout prendre* was the first feature-length autobiographical fiction film produced in Quebec/Canada, and among the first anywhere, (1963, 139 minutes; Best Picture 1964 Canadian Film Awards; *Take It All* and *All Things Considered* are the common translations for the untranslatable idiom that is its title). Director Claude Jutra (1930-1965), trained both as a medical doctor and an actor, had been since the late 1940s the darling of Montreal cinephile culture and of the two Canadian state media organizations, Radio-Canada (the French wing of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) and the Office national du film (French wing of the National Film Board of Canada).

In this first independent, low-budget project Jutra experimented with multiple influences—from European art cinema (Cocteau, Fellini, Truffaut...) to American independent cinema (Deren, Anger, Cassavetes) to the emerging Quebec direct cinema (part of the NFB's famous “French unit,” he had also collaborated with his film’s dedicatee Jean Rouch) and Canadian experimental animation (another major mentor was the film’s other dedicatee Norman McLaren).



Influences from New Wave cinema.



Influences from Cassavetes.



Written by, starring and edited by Jutra himself, the narrative of this “auto-fiction” is based on his own real life, specifically an affair with black model Johanne Harrelle he had lived with several years earlier (Harrelle, a real-life actress and model, plays herself at his side in the film). Their love affair is filmed with a frankness that is astonishing for 1963—in terms of the taboos of both heterosexual adultery and interracial sexuality—as are middle-class Claude’s relationships with two other women and even his leading man on his film set (Claude’s character is a film director in the narrative). The film’s fluid black-and-white aesthetic is remarkable for its improvisational, playful and intimate nature, as the fractured narrative unfolds within Montreal’s cosmopolitan urban world in the midst of modernist transformation and the bohemian francophone subculture of the day, at grips with a Catholic heritage during the historical period known as Quebec’s *révolution tranquille* (Quiet Revolution).



The film's fluid black and white aesthetic.

Both characters offer climactic confessions within the narrative: Johanne is not the exotic Haitian she claims to be but a rejected Montreal orphan struggling to fit into white Québécois society, and Claude admits to the viewer (though not to Johanne) that he is homosexual. After a rhapsodic relationship, Johanne suddenly announces that she is pregnant and Claude reacts badly, pushed to the brink by negative reactions from his overbearing mother, a manipulative priest, and Johanne's bullying ex-boyfriend; his reaction is played out in multiple masochistic fantasies inspired by *Scorpio Rising* and *film noir*. Claude breaks off the relationship cold turkey by telephone, and mails Johanne borrowed money to pay for an abortion. Johanne is not amused, the breakup is messy, and Claude escapes on a plane to Africa at the end, where it seems his own African-flavored fantasies are replacing Johanne's!

Commentators often notice that fantasy scenes where Claude's roller-coaster emotional life is playfully enacted in two fatal plunges into a river anticipate the director's own 1986 suicide (Jutra's diagnosis with early-onset Alzheimers led to his real-life leap off the Jacques-Cartier bridge into the St. Lawrence River).

Jutra's prolific subsequent career, inside both the state agencies and the independent production sector in both French and English Canada, would arguably never achieve the aesthetic heights of *À tout prendre*. However, for reasons of the latter film's uneven availability in either French or English until recently, it was eclipsed by Jutra's 1971 coming-of-age drama *Mon oncle Antoine* that stayed at the top of the Canadian cinema ten-best film lists for decades.

Go to [essay on *À tout prendre* by Gregorio Pablo Rodríguez-Arbolay Jr.](#)



Black bodies, queer desires: Québécois national anxieties of race and sexuality in Claude Jutra's *À tout prendre* (1963)

by [Gregorio Pablo Rodríguez-Arbolay Jr.](#)



French and English promotional posters for Jutra's
À tout prendre

As one of the most provocative and once widely respected filmmakers in Québécois cinema, the works of Claude Jutra have visualized the paradoxes and contradictions of narrating a new national identity in modern Québec. With his first solo feature, *À tout prendre* (1963), Jutra deployed the progressive cultural politics of modernity, secular nationalism, and anti-colonialism of the Quiet Revolution to illustrate the anxieties of modern Québécois (hetero)sexuality of the 1960s. Inventive in its form and in its provocative narrative, Jutra's *À tout prendre* not only signaled a new discourse for the cinematic representation of the Quiet and Sexual Revolutions, but also presented one of the first filmic attempts to explore race in Québec.

During the proceeding Post-war period of the 1950s, Québec witnessed the birth of a national form of documentary filmmaking under the auspices of the National Film Board's *L'équipe française*. Through documenting and visualizing the lives and experiences of francophone Québécois communities that had been historically absent from movie screens, these directors attempted to capture unfiltered voices of francophone identities in transition in the hopes of cinematically reimagining national identity. This assemblage of socio-cultural and historical filmic narratives engendered a modern, anti-colonial Québécois national subject (often white, male, anti-imperialist, heterosexual). And at the same time, these documentaries developed a cinematic national collectivity through the deployment of allegorical notions of tradition, community, and cultural memory. Yet, between 1953 and 1963, no feature fiction films were produced in Québec (Marshall 120). [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) All films and cinemas were subject to the religious dictates of the parochial censorship board.

As the first independently-produced feature fiction film in Québec, *À tout prendre* marked a monumental shift in Québec cinema both in terms of its edgy modern style and its provocative subject matter. To make it, Claude Jutra endured personal and economic burdens of self-financing the film, which re-imagined his former inter-racial love affair with Johanne Harrelle. Once the film was out, in Canada Jutra stood at the forefront of establishing new genre-bending modes of cinema (direct-cinema, New Wave, "auto-fiction"). In the course of this paper, I will explore the development of Québécois secular and post-colonial nationalist discourse in *À tout prendre*. Through investigating the power of these discursive developments in Jutra's cinematic reflection upon modern Québec, we can begin to excavate the fault lines of race and sexuality during the Quiet Revolution.

As Thomas Waugh proclaimed in his 1998 Martin Walsh Lecture,

"We need to fundamentally rethink the discursive links between sexuality and national identity within our cinemas, for they often testify to the same contradictory mix of excess, disavowal, and mystification that sexuality faces in our culture as a whole" (13).

My aim here is to use *À tout prendre* to historicize and critique the development of the secular and anti-colonial discourses on modernity, race, and sexuality in the Québécois national project and cinemas. As Claude Jutra was keenly involved in the cultural politics of the era, he harnessed film as a vehicle to engage with sexual taboos of Quiet Revolution and Québec secular nationalism. Here, I will analyze the narrative and historical context of *À tout prendre* as a bridge to survey these shifting cultural and cinematic codes.

National modernity and post-colonial discourses in Québec

The shifting political and cultural conditions of the Quiet Revolution manifested themselves heavily in the way modern national cinema developed in Québec. Public spheres and censorship boards were secularized, which resulted in the introduction of new themes, ideas,

and identities to Québécois screens. As cinematic codes continued to modernize, Quebec film scholar, Scott Mackenzie suggests that cultural codes regulating depictions of race and sexuality in film also began to shift in line with secular Québec nationalism and decolonization (MacKenzie 51). In order for me to situate the semiotic manifestation of these shifting conditions in *À tout prendre*, I must emphasize the importance of remembering how Québec is a *settler colony* and postcolonial space. What is now known as the Canadian province of Québec was originally inhabited by ten First Peoples was colonized by the French in 1608, then in 1763 by the British, and later subjected to (Anglophone) Canadian federal clientelism until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. For these reasons, the question of *colonialism* emerged once again during the 60s and 70s as part of a renewed, modern sovereigntist movement. Robert Schwartzwald addresses this legacy of colonialism and how it figured at that moment in his article on post-colonial criticism in Québec:

“‘Quebec’ was then figured as a voiceless, disempowered collectivity of francophones of French ancestry, one in which others sharing its territory were regarded either as invader-occupiers or, if immigrants of non-Anglo-American descent, their potential pawns in an aggressive campaign of assimilationist design. In the 1960s and 1970s, these views were condensed through an anti-imperialist lens that focused on Quebec as oppressed and overdue for decolonization” (Schwartzwald 116).

This ethnic and ontological association with whiteness and francophone heritage during this period of decolonization foregrounds the visual language of Québécois racial (and sexual) politics that emerges in *À tout prendre*. Jutra’s exploration of race and sexuality crystallizes in his exploration of the colonial racialization and black identity of Johanne Harrelle, who starred with Jutra in the film. Harrelle plays a version of herself, a Black model and actress while Jutra plays “Claude,” a film director.



Claude and Johanne re-enacting their contentious love affair.

From early conversations on Négritude and the work of Césaire and Fanon in *Parti Pris* (1963-1968) to Albert Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé* (1963), the Québec nationalist project formed political affinities with Franco-African post-colonial and U.S. Black Power movements. However, as Schwartzwald indicates,

“the discourse of decolonization’s Manichean construction of reality (colonizer vs. colonized) and a totalizing view of social phenomena created the unifying effects necessary to make ‘internal’ differences secondary” (Schwartzwald 138).

Ironically, considering that their national re-articulations stemmed from their intellectual engagement with decolonizing nations and racialized subjects, advocates of Québécois de-colonial nationalism rarely acknowledged their country’s own historical colonization of First Nations territories. Of particular interest here is their often problematic identification with Black Québécois (Mills 44). In fact, Québécois nationalism during the sixties often cited the racialized marginality of Third-World and American Black peoples by colonial and state apparatuses as a metaphoric equivalent for Québécois marginality vis-à-vis English Canada. This anti-colonial discourse was also at the core of the formation of a new collective national identity through the propagation of *pure laine* racial politics (Austin 25). In that sense, the terms *pure laine* (pure wool) and *Québécois de souche* (of French European stock) refer to a white ethno-nationalist identity politics that grounds authentic Québécois identity within French colonial bloodlines. Obviously the two forms of racial identification

within Québécois identity politics were at odds.

At the height of the Quiet Revolution, as film became a visualizing project of nation building, it introduced a modern cinematic sensibility to Québécois audiences. Throughout the late 1950s, Jutra's career paralleled the development of the Québec film industry, from his documentary work with National Film Board to his experimental film production with Norman McLaren. He visited France in 1958 to meet Jean Rouch, the ethnologist and direct-cinema documentarian, and Rouch's work radically transformed Jutra's understanding of documentary film (Leach 54). Rouch's deep seated criticism of colonial anthropological methods in cinema ignited a newly found consciousness in Jutra about his own connection to the post-colonial world, made evident through his feature-length documentary work in *Le Niger, jeune république* (1961).

Queering Claude's Québec

À tout prendre was the first Québécois *auto-fictional* feature film to integrate *direct cinema* and avant-garde techniques. It destabilized the traditional demarcations between history and story-telling. At the intersection between memoir and fiction, the film recasts the past through Claude Jutra and Johanne Harrelle's performative reproduction of their former sexual relationship. As he employed a documentary film aesthetic to fictionalize the past, Jutra challenged audiences to reconsider relations between 'truth' and fiction during the Quiet Revolution (Leach 67). Moreover, to present an interracial sexual relationship was a novel sight on Québécois screens, and the film served as an important vehicle to engage with the moral sexual taboos of the Quiet Revolution and Québec secular nationalism. Furthermore, in its very depiction of sexuality, Scott Mackenzie has identified *À tout prendre* as the first time in North America that a bed scene was filmed between a white man and a black woman (MacKenzie 51).



Claude and Johanne
embracing in bed.

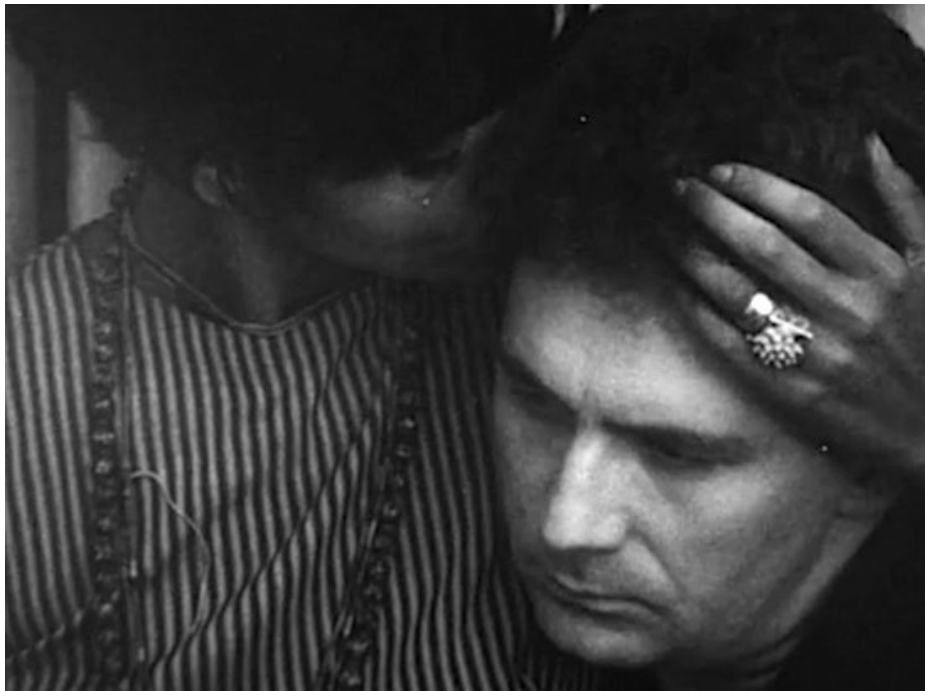
During this period, the sovereigntist project of Québecité was envisaged as a *pure laine* androcentric heteronormative project, through re-configuring national sexual hegemony from a former colonial and parochial emasculation to a new virile francophone white male subject. Jeffrey Vacante suggests during the Quiet Revolution “whether sex was promoted as a function of “racial” duty or the source of non-reproductive pleasure, heterosexuality has remained stubbornly at the centre of nationalist discourse, as well as of the historical narrative” (Vacante 34). This compulsory ethno-heterocentrism narrates Claude’s clumsy quest to be ‘*straight*.’ To portray the emblematic figure of the new (urban) nationalist man through the performance of hetero-normalcy, even in spite of his transgressive sexuality. This performance stands in stark opposition to the film’s contemporaries such as *Pour la suite du monde* (1963) and *Le chat dans le sac* (1964), which lauded the (white) hetero-virility of working class and rural masculinities (Marshall 49). As the main protagonist and narrator of *À tout prendre*, Claude illustrates the paradoxes of modern Québécois masculinity. From his subscription to *Life Magazine* to his habitual dalliances with various women, Claude keenly performs his role as the urbane bourgeois intellectual. This social positionality within the period was often associated with the de-virilising federalist and colonialist hegemony and petty-bourgeois pederasty. Schwartzwald terms this development as ‘The fear of federasty,’ which he describes as a “reactionary response to political oppression that attempts to turn the tables on these national traitors by figuring them as effeminate and penetrable, hence weak” (Schwartzwald, “Fear of *Federasty*: Quebec’s Inverted Fictions” 179-81). Claude’s character development throughout the film chronicles his struggles to contend with the audacity of such normative masculine scripts. The performance of this ideal unravels throughout the course of the film as Claude’s identity becomes increasingly fragmented.



Claude
fragmented in
mirror.

From one of the first scenes, Claude dresses in various costumes in front of a mirror, playfully shifting through various masculine stereotypes: a gangster, a detective, a Pierrot figure reminiscent of an earlier experimental work, *Pierrot des bois* (1956). This multiple performance of masculinity literally fractures as Claude shoots at his reflection in the mirror with a revolver. This fragmentation of self is semiotically representative of Jutra's personal quest for identity, encompassing the concurrent national crisis of identity politics during the Quiet Revolution (Vacante 33). As discourses of modernity and national sovereignty took hold, re-articulations of Québec national identity were in constant shift since at the same time urban culture faced the disruption of traditional notions of masculinity and heterosexuality associated with the Sexual Revolution.

As Claude and Johanne's amorous exchanges shift from gifts to confessions, the pair begin a precarious game of disclosure. From the Catholic Church to the Victorian medical clinic, the act of confession has been historically linked to the moral regulation of sex and sexuality (Waugh 60). In a *À tout prendre*, the bed assumes the confessional space where Claude and Johanne divulge their closely guarded secrets. Their game of disclosure eventually leads Johanne to inquire about Claude's possible homosexuality.



"Est-ce que tu aimes les
garçons?"

Claude offers no response to Johanne's inquiry, neither confirming nor denying such an accusation. The affirmation of his homosexual desire remains beyond the level of verbal discourse for Claude, as Jutra's later allusion to a sexual encounter with another man suggests.

Alongside the status of *À tout prendre* as the first North American cinematic portrayal of an inter-racial bed scene, Jutra also presented one of the first illusions to 'coming-out' as well as the first explicit account of same-sex desire in Québec (Waugh, *The Fruit Machine* 201). In a later scene following a rehearsal during a film within a film, Claude invites his male lead to his apartment for cigarettes and libations. As laughter turns into seductive stares, the screen shifts to black as Claude breathes a sigh of relief: "*en fin.*" (finally). The audience is provided with little more than a suggestion of homosexual sex, but such an insinuation spoke volumes during the 1960s.



This queer subtext was quite novel for the period. Waugh suggests.

“this shocking [statement] is permissible in 1963 only in the social and artistic context established by the film. The social context—bohemian and artistic— were one of the few in which lesbians and gays could be relatively open before Stonewall” (Waugh, *The Fruit Machine* 203).

Prior to the federal Omnibus Bill of 1969 that decriminalized homosexuality and abortion, the Canadian government actively intruded into their citizens' bedrooms (and cinemas)—policing moral sexual taboos ranging from inter-racial sex and adultery to abortion and homosexuality. These subjects explicitly presented in *À tout prendre* were illegal or immoral during the period, directly challenging various Canadian civil and censorship laws. After the film's release, this homosexual implication (and inter-racial relationship) was panned by Québec film critics ranging from Gilles Marsolais to Denys Arcand, who saw these plotlines as avant-gardist tropes rather than a political statement of identity politics (Marshall 120). This often racist and homophobic reception resulted with

“[the] problematical questions of sexuality and class [being] postponed or papered over by the nationalist consensus of the intelligentsia [as] cinema was assumed to be a privileged medium of national expression in the sixties and pre-Parti Québécois seventies nationalist responses to divulge from the 'undefined' but sentimentally monolithic fantasy of the young *pure laine* heterosexual couple” (Waugh 88).

I contend that the inter-racial sex and queer subtext of *À tout prendre* presents us an archive of the discursive tensions of racial and sexual alterity during the 1960s. As heteronormative sovereigntist standards crystallized in Québec, Claude and Johanne's queer and racialized performances transgressed the cultural and cinematic codes of the white normative visual milieu, made clearly evident by the film's initial poor box office sales. In re-examining the context and performance of these transgressions through a queer and de-colonial lens, I aim to complicate and destabilize historical mythologies of the white heterocentrism of modern Québécois masculinity as well as the colonial and sovereigntist dynamics of Johanne's racialization as a black woman during the Quiet Revolution.

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Johanne's (de)colonial performance

The implication of a queer subtext in *À tout prendre* extends far beyond a moral provocation since it also destabilizes the discursive limits of white heteronormative national masculinity. Through the course of the film narrative, Claude's identity becomes increasingly fragmented—beyond his gender identity alone. Through his interactions with Johanne's racial difference, Claude's quest for identity as a white bourgeois subject becomes re-articulated as a dialogue with Otherness, becoming symbolic of the crisis of identity politics during the Quiet Revolution.



"Your fingers are white."

As Claude and Johanne explore their corporeal difference, the cultural normalization of Claude's whiteness becomes exposed vis-à-vis Johanne's racialized alterity. In his treatise on the spectacle of race and representation, Stuart Hall contends,

"We need 'difference' because we can only construct meaning through dialogue with the 'Other' (235). ... "The representation of 'difference' through the body became the discursive site through which much of this 'racialized knowledge' was produced and circulated" (244).

[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Johanne's racialized otherness stabilizes Claude's performance of masculinity and initially averts attention away from *his* implicit otherness. This elucidation of Claude's whiteness exposes the nature of his quest to present himself as a *normative heterosexual subject*, especially after he learns of Johanne's ontological charade of 'passing' as Haitian. Through Jutra's gradual

destabilization of Johanne's race and origin, he effectively also implodes *pure laine* nationalist logics of citizenship. Before the debut of *À tout prendre*, Black subjects were virtually absent from Québec cinema and rarely presented as a member of the national body politic (Austin 23). In this manner, *À tout prendre* presented one of the first tentative filmic attempts to explore race in Québec through Jutra's inclusion of a Black woman as Québécoise (Marshall 129). As Mary Green puts it,

"Jutra [gave] Johanne a voice while representing the conditions of her oppression in a situation of colonial domination" (97).

Even though she is a main character in the film, the realization of Johanne's identity is quite elusive. Claude's role as narrator of the film means the storyline prioritizes the exploration of his identity. For the audience, Johanne's identity appears even more fragmented than Claude's by way of the construction of her difference. From her foreign origins to her estranged husband, Johanne's history is largely obfuscated. The film's narrative relies on the spectacle of Johanne's otherness as a conduit to Claude's search for subjectivity. Interestingly, a similar sense of female objectification and scopophilia is also associated with French New Wave films of the period. In fact, Jutra's connection to the French New Wave extends beyond *À tout prendre* to the late 1950s, with his literary and cinematic collaborations with acclaimed director, François Truffaut (who made a cameo in the film). As exhibited through *À tout prendre*'s auteurist narration via a narcissistic bourgeois male perspective, this film also reflects Geneviève Sellier's claim about French New Waves films, that they were typified by a "cinophilic gaze [that] is necessarily male, heterosexual, and directed toward icons, fetishes, and female sexual objects," (23). Here, the same kind of "cinophilic gaze" structures the discourses of objectification that present Johanne's racialized difference.



"Look at me." Claude attempts to gain Johanne's attention while she is being adored by fans.

Through her profession as a model, Johanne's subjectivity in the film remains one-dimensional, transfixed largely in the realm of the visual, adapting her portrayal of self to suit the context and narration of her spectator. In a 'testimony' by Johanne with co-star Victor Désy, she exclaims: "I don't really play a character in *À tout prendre*: Victor, that's me" (Daudelin 13). In this vein, I propose that

Johanne's elusive performance of self is quite tactical. Through the presentation of a fragmented subjectivity, Johanne can to some degree control the masquerade of her identity and capitalize upon her evasive social location(s). The improvisational nature of the script—inherited from direct cinema methods of unfiltered and spontaneous dialogue—matched with the film's basis in the couple's collective memory, provided Johanne with an increased level of agency to influence her aspects of her own discourse (Harrelle, "Lettre de Johanne Harrelle à Claude Jutra" September 1963 [my translation]).



Introducing Johanne singing Ti-zoizeau

Throughout the film, Johanne is framed as this exotic other, the Haitian *chanteuse* and model. From her introduction at the party where she sings a song in Creole, we are directed to not attempt understanding or translation, as if she was an ethnographic 'native' spectacle. This scene indoctrinates the audience into conceptualizing Johanne as an exotic Haitian other. As Stuart Hall would suggest in general terms,

"this [scene] both shows an event (denotation) and carries a 'message' or meaning (connotation)—[what] Barthes would call a 'meta-message' or *myth* about race, color and 'otherness'" (229).

Such a meta-message of Johanne's alterity is couched in the erotic spectacle of her Haitian origins, which both reproduces a mythical colonial identity while mobilizing the possibilities for a re-inscription of Johanne's sexuality. In ciphering these colonial scripts of race and sexuality, Johanne constructs her alterity. It is one that we will later come to understand as tactical. In her seminal text, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins insists,

"Just as harnessing the power of the erotic is important for domination, reclaiming and self-defining that same eroticism may constitute one path toward Black women's empowerment" (128).

In this assemblage of her alterity, Johanne's exotic sexuality becomes a tool to capitalize upon colonial and imperialist erotic conceptualizations of her racialized difference.



Photoshoot on Park Mont-Royal.



Jutra's white colonial gaze.

While it is far from explicit whether her presentation of difference is what attracts Claude's attention, it is certain that her otherness is central to their romance. As their relationship develops, Claude decides one afternoon to photograph Johanne in Parc Mont-Royal. The scene is accompanied by non-diegetic music of 'African' drums synchronized to Johanne promenading across the screen. This background music arises repeatedly throughout the film, providing soundtrack to Johanne's performance of her alterity. This sonic leitmotif shadows Johanne, from her exuberant jive in the Black Jazz club to Claude's fantasies of Johanne's Haitian youth. Despite her modern attire and choreography, this symbolic musical accompaniment authenticates Johanne's blackness through evoking cinematic tropes of minstrelsy. In impersonating such a colonial racialized pastiche,

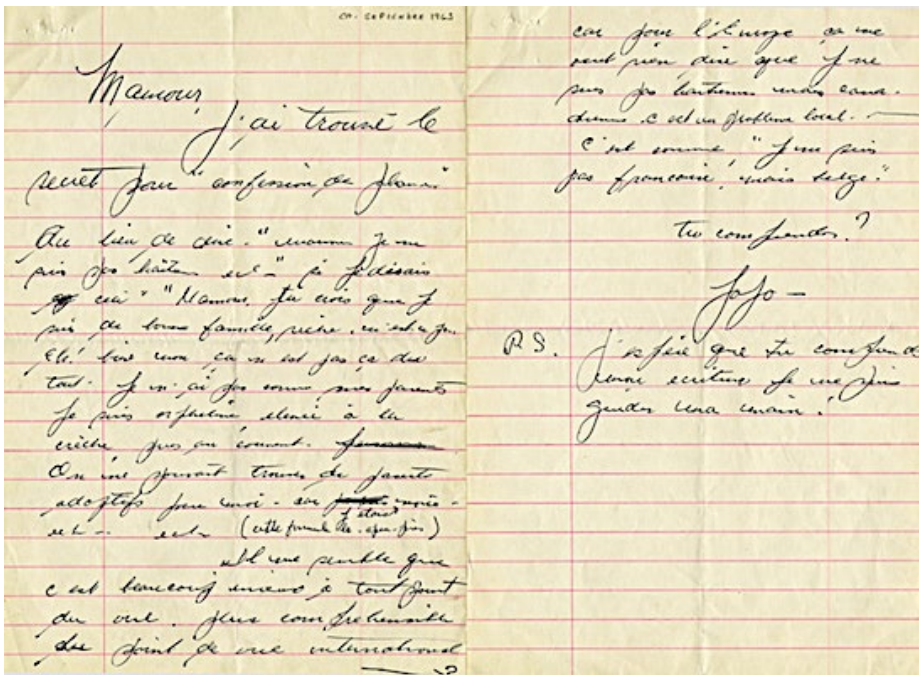
Johanne demonstrates the systematic nature by which “[black] women [have] construct[ed] sexual meanings and practices within this overarching structure of heterosexual power relations” (Collins 131). Performing her blackness as she sashays across the field, I believe that Johanne understands her subaltern agency in this masquerade. During this sequence, Johanne asserts her abilities as a model to manifest her own representation. This performance is one in which is conscious of Claude as the spectator as Johanne adapts herself to suit his direction and imagining of her difference.



Johanne confessing her fabricated performance as Haitian.

This particular figuring of Johanne’s difference is one that is fixed within her blackness as Haitian. During their precarious game of disclosure, Johanne breaks her silence and reveals her own closely guarded secret about her origins. This scene serves as the crux to destabilizing the Québécois colonial logics of authenticating Blackness as exotic/foreign. And it is a scene that was filmed with much emotional labor. In the process of drafting the dramatic re-enactment of Johanne’s confession, she and Jutra worked closely to capture the ‘honesty’ of the event (Leach 87). In a handwritten letter from Johanne to Jutra, she shares an epiphany regarding the confessional dialogue, which eventually became directly integrated into the film.

“I have found the secret for ‘Johanne’s confession’. Rather than saying, ‘My love, I’m not Haitian, etc.’ what if I were to say this: ‘My love, you think that I’m from a rich family, don’t you? But no, that’s not it at all. I didn’t know my parents, I am an orphan, brought up in an orphanage and then in a convent. They couldn’t find me adoptive parents, because I was Black, etc., etc.’ (this phrasing, more or less). I think that this is much better from all points of view, and more comprehensible for an international audience” (Harrelle, “Lettre de Johanne Harrelle à Claude Jutra” September 1963) [my translation].



Letter from Johanne to Jutra discussing "Johanne's confession"

As an actress she was conscious about her reception, and this letter documents one of Johanne's strategic attempts to influence the direction of her character development. Moreover, Johanne would have been aware that this confession would extend far beyond the film into Johanne's personal life, rendering the fallacy of her performance public (Rudel-Tessier, "Johanne n'était pas haïtienne mais elle avait ses raisons" 1964).

Despite the fact that Johanne's confession proclaims her status as Québécoise and not Haitian, Jim Leach suggests,

"as a member of a visible minority, Johanne appears foreign even though she was born in Québec. Johanne's gender and race do not make her into the exotic other but rather render visible the colonial mechanism that govern cultural life in Québec" (86).

These colonial mechanisms reveal the conditions that led Johanne to construct her identity outside of the realm of Afro-Québecité. In the film, Johanne explains that as an orphan, she was advised by social workers to present herself as Haitian to increase her chances of adoption. In an interview with *Photo-Journal* shortly before the debut of *À tout prendre*, Johanne elucidated some of the francophone nationalist dynamics involved in her decision to present herself as Haitian:

"RT: At one time, you believed that if you presented yourself as Haitian then French-Canadians would accept you, but if you presented as Canadian they would reject you?

JH: Yes...

RT: And since then, did you ever tell yourself that maybe you could be wrong?

JH: [Vigorously shaking her head] As a Haitian, I was welcomed everywhere. I was 'exotic'!" (Rudel-Tessier, "Johanne n'était pas haïtienne mais elle avait ses raisons" 1964 [my translation]).

Within this short dialogue, Johanne exposes the colonial racial dynamics that she would later come to display and subvert in her 'exotic' black performance. She acts this way to secure a legible and accepted positionality within a white francophone nationalist matrix.

In her work on adoption in the Americas, Karen Dubinsky argues that Black children in Montréal during the 1950s and 1960s were often advised to engage in similar performances (40). Such an adoption program capitalized upon the increased focus on the Francophonie during the Quiet Revolution, coupled with an increased desire for the exotic other. It must be noted that Black communities have lived in Montréal for centuries, but increased migration from Haiti in the 1960s began to refigure the parameters of Black identity in the city (Austin 55). Within the Québec national project, English and French black subjects assumed very different roles in francophone nationalism; Afro-Caribbean subjects were only ambivalently included in the Québécois nationalist project.

We can come to a more nuanced understanding of Johanne's tactical performance of her identity in turning to José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification. Muñoz argues,

“disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies of the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (9).

Johanne assembles her fiction of identity through her disidentificatory performance as Haitian. Her experience of marginalization as a black woman provides her with an epistemic advantage to perform her identity through the codes of the oppressor. This presents an example of the strategies marginalized subjects employ to situate themselves in history and seize social agency. Johanne's performance of blackness capitalized upon colonial articulation of race, gender, sexuality, and difference to maneuver the survival strategies available to her as a subaltern subject. This ontological tactic renders Johanne's difference legible, while sanitizing it to secure inclusion within the national body politic.

Conclusion

As an intertextual assemblage of fiction and memoir, *À tout prendre* presents the foundation for Jutra's poignant exploration of the crisis of sex and identity politics during the early Quiet Revolution. The film's unprecedented portrayal of an interracial relationship and queer sexual subtext presented a palpable destabilization of Québécois nationalist sexual discourse. Through the rearticulation of Claude's (white) national and sexual identity vis-à-vis Johanne's racial difference, the film highlights the anti-colonial and nationalist tensions around sexuality, whiteness and alterity in a modernizing Québec. Its juxtaposition of racialized sexual difference and queerness makes *À tout prendre* an archive of these discursive tensions and the strategies that marginalized subjects employed to situate themselves in history during the Quiet Revolution. Beyond cinematic analysis, in deconstructing standard histories of this period, I hope we can develop new ground to confront the contemporary challenges of ensuring that racial and sexual difference are not simply relegated to the position of endnotes.

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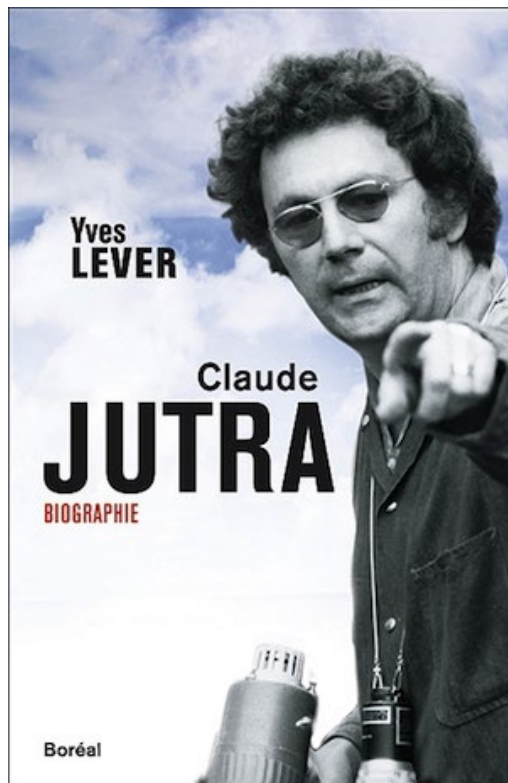
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Lever's biography

“Do you like boys?” Claude Jutra’s disappearances: confession, courage, cowardice

by [Thomas Waugh](#)

“Dedicated to all victims of intolerance.” [1] [[open endnotes in new page](#)]

“Moral Valuation: Centered on an adulterous relationship, this unhealthy film complacently showcases the disturbances of its heroes. To be banned.”

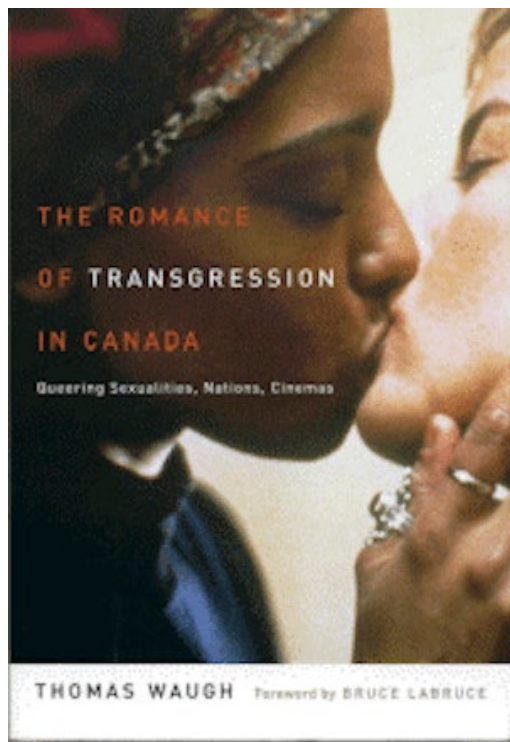
— Re: *À tout prendre*. Office catholique national des techniques de diffusion [National Catholic Office of Dissemination Techniques (Quebec)].1964 [2]

“The Jutra affair” of 2016 is of interest to all *Jump Cut* readers concerned not only with archives and national cinemas but also with sexual representation and queer identities in film history and cultural theory. Moreover, in the wake of the roller-coaster peripeteias of the careers of Woody Allen and Nate Parker, not to mention D.W. Griffith and Leni Riefenstahl, it would be useful to reflect more deeply on the dynamics of blame, rectitude, canonization, and redemption in cultural historiography.

In the meantime, in this essay about Quebec founding filmmaker Claude Jutra (1930-1986) I would like first to update a paper on Jutra’s “new wave” autocinema masterpiece, *À tout prendre* (1963), which I had presented at the Cinémathèque québécoise in November 2015 (the 50th anniversary of the release of this groundbreaking film). This happened a few months prior to the appearance of Yves Lever’s incriminating biography of the director, a book that would unleash Jutra’s well known “disappearance” and the surrounding turbulence of 2016 that have sparked this *Jump Cut* special section on Jutra.

Thereafter I would like to skim and wander back and forth across Jutra’s prolific oeuvre like a detective, beguiled and bewitched, in search of the pedophile who burst into the spotlight three decades after his first disappearance (by suicide in 1986)—and now has been “disappeared” a second time through media, institutional and cultural symbolic violence thirty years later. I would like to briefly re-examine six of Jutra’s films that are most relevant to the issue of pedophilia, searching for the secret and the courage as well as the poetry and the erotics. In conclusion, prodded by these textual pleasures, challenges and dilemmas, I will ponder the ethical and political responsibility of the queer film historian—in 2006 and in 2017—in the exploration of the queer [film] archive, in the modulation or defense or subversion of the queer [or national] canon.

I have been writing about Claude Jutra for most of my career, and once heard through mutual friends that he had been happy that I had called him the E.M. Forster of Quebec cinema (because of his lifelong silence following his youthful



The Romance of Transgression



Dreamspeaker, 1975

confessional *À tout prendre*) in a piece I published about lesbian and gay images in Quebec cinema in 1981. I have continued to honor and respect him as one of the two “founding queens” of Canadian and Quebec cinema (along with his mentor-collaborator Norman McLaren, 1914-1987). In *The Romance of Transgression in Canada*, my 2006 monograph on Canadian queer cinema, I devoted 35 or so pages to the more than 30 films of this “ancestor, enigma, and martyr of queer cinema in Canada” and thought that I had finally got Jutra out of my system. I was wrong. Now, thanks to the scandal, Jutra has acquired even more symbolic importance as an unlikely protagonist in the resistance to a neo-liberal empire shored up in equal part by two “wars”—the war on terrorists and migrants, and the war on sex offenders. I will explain.

As I observed in my 2006 book in great detail but without once using forensic trigger labels (out of cowardice?), a singular sensibility that I will call pedophile is perceptible in almost all Jutra’s films, whether in a major way in a film like *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971) or in a minor way in *À tout prendre*. It is never explicit, it goes without saying, but rather is translated or channeled in glowing iconographies of boys’ bodies, faces and gestures, and in highly empathetic narrative themes of coming of age, pedagogy, suffering, ageing, discovery, corporeal pleasure, sociality, etc. This sensibility fuels a creative energy that has not lost its power over the generations. I respectfully explored the intergenerational discourses in Jutra’s oeuvre in 2006, and have not changed my mind in the last decade nor since the scandal, not one syllable. Who would or could disappear Jutra from the highest-echelon list of world filmmakers from Jean Vigo to Satyajit Ray to François Truffaut and Céline Sciamma who have bequeathed to us movies brilliantly capturing the subjectivity and agency of kids?

The traces of pedophile desire in Jutra’s oeuvre have often been innocently inventoried by critics but without ever being pushed towards what are for me their obvious biographical meanings. In my book and elsewhere I explored these iconographies and themes with a neutral tone, with respect. I did so without blame, without moralization, without the attitude of the lyncher,[3] inquisitor or morality squad, having grown up like Jutra in a society where my desires were criminal.[4] My treatment of Jutra was I hope in the open, neutral spirit of my idols, from Hirschfeld to Kinsey to Gayle Rubin, from Pasolini to Foucault...

Accordingly, I treated this tendency as artistic sensibility rather than forensic proof. In doing so, I was knowingly following a widespread tradition within queer and proto-queer communities over the last centuries, that is to say a tolerance or rather an acceptance of a whole “benign”[5] spectrum of orientations, fantasies and consensual behaviors, all the while denouncing all forms of non-consensual assault, sexual or otherwise. Otherwise, on a similar topic, I would co-write four years after *Romance* on another very beautiful Quebec film, in English this time, that asks the question of intergenerational relations somewhat more directly: Frank Vitale’s English-language *Montreal Main* (1974) that also falls under the radar it seems of Quebec film critics and scholars (Waugh and Garrison 2010).

Romance engages with Jutra the pedophile, discreetly but empathetically. I described in passing elements of his films as “calfcake... striptease... scopophilic fantasies... obliqueness... tentative and contradictory confessions and disavowals, steps back and forth on the cultural continuums that span from homosocial male bonding to same-sex genital exchange, from parental love through same-sex mentorship to intergenerational eros.” I concluded,

“Jutra the poet of youthful learning cannot be separated from the Jutra whose erotic fulfilment derives from engagement in that process. This is the essence of Jutra’s work. Here is the terror it has held for critics and film historians, here are the secret and the courage that his closest collaborators couldn’t face.”

This discussion of obliqueness and ambiguity was too oblique and ambiguous for the 2016 biographer Yves Lever and the journalists that buzzed around the scandal that his biography sparked. With regard to my phrase, “intergenerational eros,” Matthew Hays, my ex-student and ongoing collaborator, helpfully deciphered it publicly on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: “That’s a film academic’s way of suggesting Jutra’s work had pedophilic overtones.” Journalists still did not understand such ambiguities, much less my empathy or my discretion.[6] This podium is a chance to dot some i’s.

I have chosen a visual format, not only because Jutra was first and foremost a visual artist, but also because his images are all the more urgently important in the wake of his forced invisibility in 2016, his “disappearance” from the Canadian and Québécois public spheres. These images are important as well because of the blinkers of film scholars and critics in the face of what Jutra placed in front of them on the cinema screen over almost four decades (1948-1985). This format retains in any case the spirit of my audiovisual presentations both pre- and post-scandal, and reminds us of its work-in-progress status.

I

“[The cinema] makes things move fast and it makes the views that we have on life change and most certainly all the laws concerning sexuality have been reformed, in part due to film which was the strongest, most efficient vehicle of eroticism. So we have a sexual revolution; ...I think probably film has been the strongest instrument in the sexual revolution, that’s one thing.... And sexually, people are much less driven than they used to be when it was forbidden.... I went to a psychiatrist and I found a lot of gratification in that and the great, great relief of talking about things that I didn’t even dare think about before and, consciously, it’s all related to guilt of sorts. A lot of guilt about sexual things and a lot of guilt about other people and all of a sudden being able to talk freely about something; that I was paying somebody to listen to me and knowing that it would not affect me directly. It was not threatening at all to speak about that. Nobody was going to punish me; it was not like confessing a crime that I could be punished for. Or in church, yes. And there was no guilt. I mean, there was, but I mean I was freeing myself of a lot of guilt and that was very relieving. But then, after a while I got bored listening to me saying all those horror stories.... [P]robably to be an actor and to step on the stage and be watched by a thousand people is a way, is probably one of the best ways of concealing what you really are to yourself and to the people closest to you. So these two different tendencies in me – secrecy and vanity....”

— Claude Jutra, 1979[7]

My update on *À tout prendre*, hopefully among other things, is a challenge to the way international movie lovers somehow remain complicit in a canonization process, thanks to Netflix and the rest, that shoves minor cinemas to the peripheries and “disappears” their great treasures and artists. This opening section, taken from my original 2015 powerpoint, has been elaborated in the light of Jutra’s second disappearance.

I began my presentation with this beautiful erotic self-portrait taken around the time of the *À tout prendre* shoot – rather bold, it goes without saying, for 1963. This tender and open gaze into the still camera reinforces a theme dear to my heart, confession and confessionality (Waugh and Arroyo, 2018). Recent ongoing research on first person and autobiographical queer cinemas and their sexual utterances has dramatically emphasized for me Jutra’s unrecognized historical role in pioneering in *À tout prendre* the transcultural current over the last several generations of what Alisa Lebow has termed “the cinema of me.” (Lebow 2012) (I

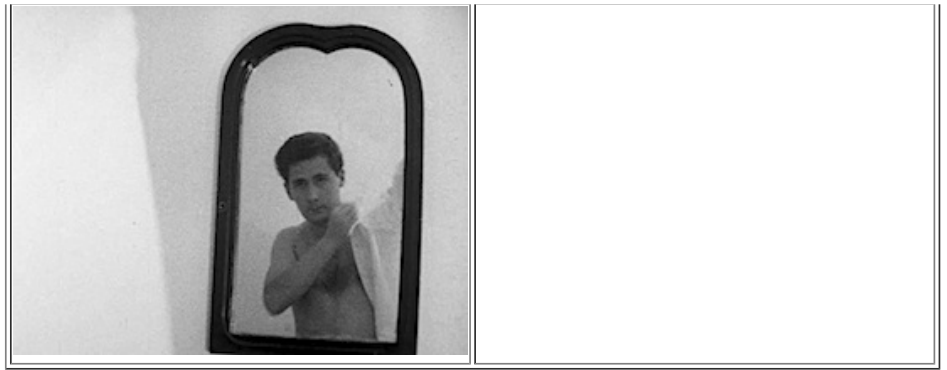
will come back to Jutra's role on the international stage in Part II. For now, as an aside, I was deeply moved when that November a man from the audience, whose name I've forgotten, came up to me after my presentation and confided in me that the small star tattoo on Jutra's bicep had as if through an epidermal confessional utterance enabled the identification of his body, recovered from the St. Lawrence River the following spring, several months after his *first* disappearance in November 1986.)



Self-portrait 1963. Courtesy La cinémathèque québécoise

Not only the best portrait of Jutra that I know, this image reminds us that the thirtysomething filmmaker was very comfortable with his body and with representations of that body, erotic as well as undraped. (As the leading man in his own film *À tout prendre*, he reveals himself naked in the opening bathing scene before meeting Johanne, as well as brazenly in the sex scenes with her—and that's without counting several other films where he had cast himself [e.g. *Pour le Meilleur et pour le pire*] or performed for his director friends) It is not surprising that the cinematographer Jean-Claude Labrecque had characterized his friend's movie as a "toilet film" (Houle and Julien 1978, 2-3).





It is important to situate this portrait historically in the mid-60s when the Quiet Revolution brushed up against the sexual revolution, a period when Montreal film culture gravitated increasingly around images of the body (especially the male body but sometimes the female body[8]). Native son Leonard Cohen acknowledged as much in the documentary about him that was released the year after Jutra's film: "a man has allowed a number of strangers into his bathroom... Here in 1964 a man has invited a group of strangers to observe him cleaning his body." [9] But Jutra went even further, even if for his two main onscreen corporeal performances of the 1950s, *Pierrot des bois* (1956) and *A Chairy Tale* (1957), his agile and supple body is clothed in stylized costumes and makeup, not nude....



Ladies and Gentlemen: Mr. Leonard Cohen (1964): the poet inviting strangers into his bath.

Before continuing, let me comment on my title's ambiguities, taken from the famous question that Johanne had posed to "my love" in *À tout prendre*. The question "Do you like boys ("Aimes-tu les garçons?") made the character Claude "confess the unconfessable." But it must be stressed that in the context of the idiomatic French spoken in Montreal's lively early 1960s bohemia frequented by the characters of the film as well as the real-life Jutra and Harrelle, "boys" obviously meant "men," and not children or even adolescents. All the more so since Claude is seen immediately after this bedroom scene on his film set, busy flirting with his adult male leading man (played by an actor then 25 years old), exchanging intense and steady looks. But what shivers this question and my title would have sparked at the height of the scandal in 2016 only a few months after my original presentation, what rich irony! All the more so since this feature is scattered, like almost all Jutra's films, with visual and dramatic traces, more or

less discreet, of pedophile desire! How else, for example, are we to interpret the character's (and the director's?) masochist fantasy in one scene where a boy playing cowboy fires on Jutra through his street-level apartment's open window during his most intimate embrace with Johanne?



Two frames from cowboy intrusion

Let me return to *À tout prendre*, one of Jutra's least pedophile films but perhaps, paradoxically, his most confessional (please see attached synopsis and description). This low-budget indie is indeed chock full of confessions: Claude to his mother; Claude to a priest confidant; Johanne to Claude. But above all Claude to the spectator, and not to Johanne with whom he has a strikingly non-confessional relationship, even to the extent of eventually dumping her without any warning by telephone!



Four confessions from *À tout prendre*: Claude to his mother, Claude to the priest, Johanne to Claude, Claude not to Johanne but voice-over to the spectator.

In Claude's big confessional moment, Johanne caresses his forehead, eyebrows and hair and whispers in his ear: "My love, do you like boys?" Claude seems surprised by the question and asks Johanne to repeat it. She does so, but in an offscreen voice, with amplified resonance, punctuated by the sound of breaking glass.[10]

"Claude (voice off): I don't say yes any more than I say no. In this way has escaped the secret that I've kept inside me even longer than I can remember. Johanne has done that. With her woman's hands, she has

lifted up the heaviest part of my burdens. She has made me confess the unconfessable and I was not ashamed and I had no hurt. And now everything is changed, for that driving desire that was never satisfied, that torment, has taken the form of a ray of hope.”[11]

It is essential that Claude’s secret is unconfessable: his torment is so traumatic that he does not confess his secret to Johanne in the diegetic world of the film, but as an autofictive character – and as filmmaker-actor-scriptwriter – only to the spectator ensconced in the darkened cinema, and this thanks to postproduction in the closed and isolated sound editing studio. (It is also significant that the sequence was shot with a spring-wound Bolex, and thus by a negligible or minimal crew).

Claude says he is not ashamed, but he lies: in fact he is ashamed, compounding his shame with his dishonesty to both himself and his confessor. But it’s the shame that unleashes the personal and artistic transformation visible both in the film and especially around the film, a shame that Eve Sedgwick, founder of queer theory, often evokes. (Sedgwick, 2003, 35-65). It matters little if Claude the autofictive character and Jutra the author, if we have to categorize them, are confessing a bisexual orientation, literally speaking: the criminal code and Catholic culture did not and do not condemn orientations but rather acts, and 1960s bohemia was coolly in step. (Something to think about in the twenty-first century!)

In the special section published on the fiftieth anniversary of *À tout prendre* and of its equally pioneering companion film of the following year *Le Chat dans le sac* (Gilles Groulx, NFB, 2014) in Montreal film magazine *24 Images*, lesbian filmmaker Jeanne Crépeau was the only contributor to get into detail on this sequence of confession and shame despite its centrality to the film:

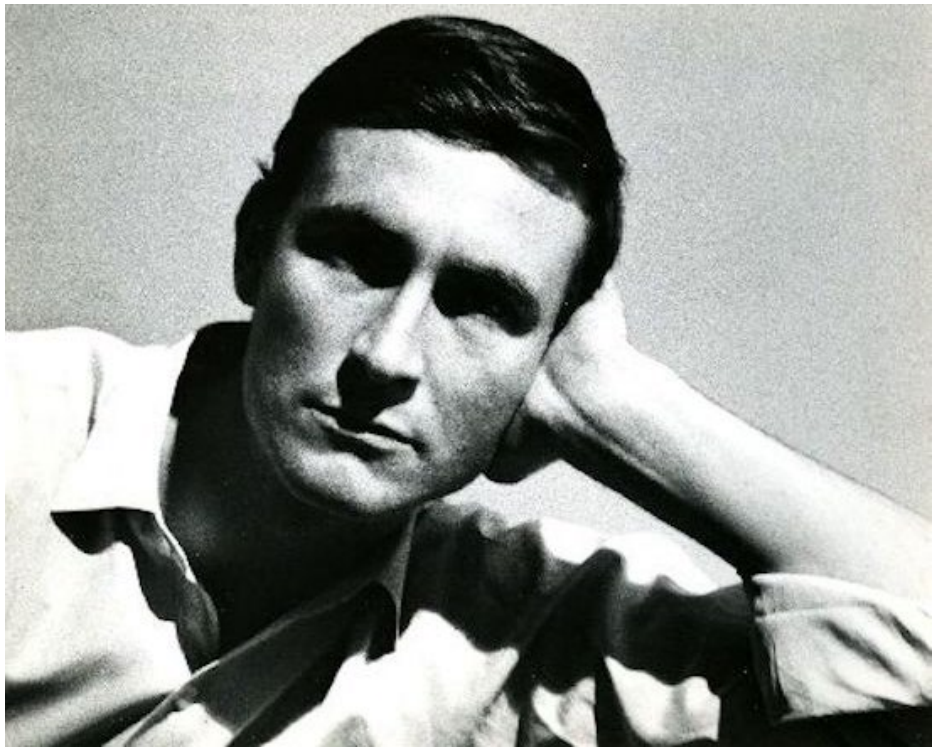
“This story of the capricious petty seducer, sympathetic but a bit cowardly, Claude himself without being wholly himself, moves me because, beyond his affectedness, Jutra offers us, at the height of the Quiet Revolution, a tragic epic of the intimate instead of a political pamphlet. In 1964, you can drive around on a Vespa without a helmet, but homosexuality is a criminal offense. As for Johanne she sings and dances, then as if it’s nothing delicately comes to liberate Claude: “My love, do you like boys?” These characters, one a mirror of the other, touch me in their desire to invent stories that they try to believe: himself hetero, herself a Haitian princess; when the real is too painful, the fiction of the self confronts the fiction of the other” (Crépeau 2014).

Nathalie Saint-Pierre is also perceptive:

“Claude oscillating between love and hate of self (and of others), through his programmed [self-] destruction of different characters living in him (the punk, the killer, [whiteface harlequin] Pierrot), right up to the insatiable lover, flitting like a butterfly among three women but all the while ignoring his deeper desires...” (Saint-Pierre 2014).

But she doesn’t unpack a certain confession that calls into question those flittings....

Next, after the truncated conversation between Claude and Johanne, come heavily histrionic lines about the delusions of romantic love recited by an actor and actress to each other on the set of Claude’s shoot, then the same-sex seduction already mentioned, and finally we hear off screen Claude’s exclamation “Finally!”



À tout prendre: the gaze of the seduced and seductive actor: “finally!”



À tout prendre: Claude in Parc Mont-Royal.



À tout prendre: the sexual underground of Rockhead's Paradise.

What a commotion around the film's single extra-diegetic confession! Not only zooms and noisy sound effects offscreen, not only a histrionic and conventional heteroromantic foil, but also, according to Martin Knelman, when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation cut this extraordinary moment from its broadcast of the English version of the film, this censorship provoked an “atrocious tribulation” for the filmmaker (Knelman 1977, 60).

Confession requires a voice. It is meaningful that Claude's is offscreen, and that his voice, accompanied by frenetic, even perturbed, visual and sound effects, is foregrounded. Sophie Deraspe comments:

“Looking recently at the two films, one of their major characteristics became apparent: enunciation. The look at the camera. Speech addressed directly to the spectator. This is no longer about identification, but about exchange. We participate... [the film] creates the desire to act... By dismantling the fourth wall, the author engages in a relationship with the spectator who can no longer be a simple voyeur since his/her presence is recognized. The cinema machine, which ordinarily operates through identification, calls this time for sharing and communication. Jutra confesses...” (Deraspe 2014).

I will come back later to relationships and sharing.

Is there such a thing as geographical confession? *À tout prendre* is one of a dozen or so great films on the Montreal metropolitan geography. Can we see its treatment of urban space, its way of living urban space, of moving about urban space, also as a kind of confession? The city is Jutra's set, celebrating modernity, diversity, and the turbulence of sexual, cultural and political alterities, identities, relationships and discourses. Like Denys Arcand twenty years later in *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986), Jutra recognizes Parc Mont-Royal (“the Mountain”) as a high-altitude sexual underground, bustling with furtive eroticism... even in winter. This recognition is surely personal for Jutra who resided at the time barely ten minutes on foot from the upper Peel Street entrance to the park, its snowy stairway represented in the film. In contrast, Arcand was, as we shall see shortly, very perturbed at the time by the spectrum of identity and

sexual difference.

Jutra's evocation of the legendary Afro-Canadian jazz club Rockhead's Paradise is not very different, stamped like the Mountain with histories of sexual subcultures and transgressive desire (this time heteronormative). And this is not to speak of urban walls covered with nationalist graffiti that subversively signal both a suppressed history and an uncertain future.



À tout prendre: "Québec libre [Free Quebec]": the political underground of graffiti.

Let's back up a bit to the historical and cultural context of *À tout prendre*, in order to see how Jutra went against the grain of certain tendencies, above all with regard both to the direct cinema movement with which he is often tied, and to the sexual revolution in full effervescence at the same moment. In the context of the documentary and documentary fiction hybrids of the first half of the 1960s, as Crépeau observes, this film is almost unique for its claims to a politics of sexuality, its resistance to censorship. Looking at Canadian direct cinema of the 1960s (francophone, anglophone and cross-pollinated), we can acknowledge several general binaries in the 1960s, corresponding roughly to Quebec and English Canada respectively: on one side the preoccupation with public space, on the other with intimacy; on one side the collective subject and on the other the individual; one was expressing itself through irony and the other through intensity; one derives from the state studio the National Film Board of Canada, the other from precarious indie infrastructures (this last formulation is admittedly slightly more complicated than my rhetorically heightened opposition implies...).



Gilles Groulx, *Golden Gloves*, 1961: collective, public.



Allan King, *A Married Couple*, 1969: individual, private.

Nevertheless, for the two linguistic/cinematic cultures, sexuality was a battlefield, most obviously in respect to the decade-long resistance to censorship. But between *Hiroshima mon amour* (slashed in Quebec in 1960, with 17 cuts adding up to 13 minutes) and *Après-Ski* (a soft core sexploitation pic convicted of criminal "obscenity" in 1973), a whole generation of Quebec documentarists from cineaste laureate Pierre Perrault to Denys Arcand evinced hardly any interest in the sexual revolution that was battering down the doors. Jutra was the exception to this chaste, sober and collective cinema: he took risks that the others did not dare and this exception took primarily the form of hybridity (fiction and direct cinema) and autofiction (confession). Arcand wanted to reproach his colleague for his abstention from the day's collective ethos but instead expressed rather his own upset towards difference (which would increasingly feel like racism and homophobia looking back in the decades to come):

"Why can Claude have a valid relationship only with this foreign Johanne whom he wants to make even stranger? There are after all "everyday" Québécois women all around him... both on-screen and psychologically. *À tout prendre* doesn't succeed in getting close in tenderness and satisfaction to real everyday women. And in that, the hero is like lots of 30-year-old French Canadians, sensitive and cultivated, who have to have women who are black, yellow or red, in any case "foreign," in order to have their intoxicating affairs. There is here, it seems, an unconscious refusal to coincide with his collective self, at the same time as an unquenchable thirst to perfect oneself in a

mythic exteriority that arises from the global situation of our people...”

“... Nothing very surprising that at that point the film seems to claim the right to homosexuality... Nothing very new or very immoral in that. The only question is to know to what extent homosexuality is a solid form of sexual activity and in what manner it has a special state of self-affirmation, given our global context of existence in relation to artistic expression.” (Arcand 1964, 35-37)

Nothing very surprising that few documentarists addressed issues of sexuality in an intellectual atmosphere that allowed such attacks! In this charged context, the singularity of the author of so many films resonating with sensuous hybridities, censorship and autocensorship, corporeal performances and claims to sexual liberation, underground spaces, subtexts and obliquities, is all the more remarkable.

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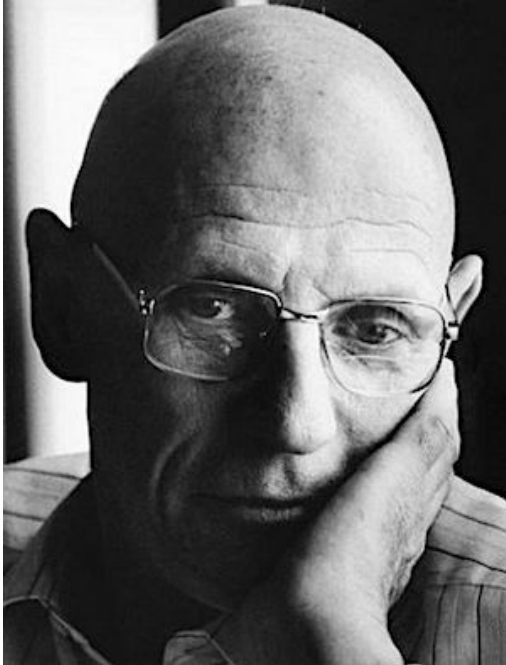
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A thinker and artist of the same generation: Foucault, four years older than Jutra (1930-1986), died two years before him, both prematurely in their fifties.

But Jutra's confession has its exemplary stature all the same, and I'd like to theorize a little more around confession as I conclude this section on *À tout prendre*. I am thinking briefly of the concept of confession that Foucault developed in the 1980s as an action, an ethical, political and affective relationship with the other. As Tom Roach explains, Foucault was preoccupied with the difference between Catholic confession and *parrhesia*, its precursor practiced by the ancients. According to Roach, *parrhesia* has a subjectifying, transformative performativity:

Foucault's model is an ethos that

"privileges self-transformation over self-knowledge/decipherment. It takes as its objective neither self-exegesis/renunciation nor the recovery of a lost, whole identity, but rather the self-to-self relation. ... Self-knowledge is of value only when it can produce an *ethos*, a change in the subject's being.... Knowledge is measured only in its practicality, in its ability to move the body, to make decisions, or, to respond to various challenges. Self-knowledge should advance the subject toward a more autonomous relation to the self; it is truthful to the extent to which it becomes ethical action.... If the confession engenders dependence on another and requires the objectification of the self to speak its truth, *parrhesia* operates along more immanentist lines: The self is not objectified but subjectivated, the self becomes the subject of true discourse and is transformed in the truth's enunciation.... friendship becomes not merely a relation but a *practice*: part of a regimen of self-care.... an ethics of friendship...." (Roach 2012, 25-26, 28, 34).

Stéphane Pujol adds:

"...if *parrhesia* is the speech of truth, it is not supposed to arise either from a strategy of demonstration, nor from an art of persuasion, nor from a pedagogy. But there is *parrhesia* when an act of truth-telling opens for him/her who utters it a space of risk." (Pujol 2015, 118).

Claude, that is to say the fictional character in the film, does not assume this risk of self-transformation. In exchanging his confession with Johanne – a partial and truncated exchange as we have seen ("I don't say yes any more than I say no") – he distances himself from her, buys her out, betrays her, and flies off to Africa at the end, his final cowardice. (Was Arcand right on this general point of cowardice, even if his rendering of the details confuses the character with the artist and is offensive to the extreme?) Yet the cowardice of the autofictional character Claude was scripted, directed and performed by Jutra the artist, and I stand in awe of his courage in confessing to the contradictory and masochistic welter of affirmation and affect that that film articulates in the 1963 context of Canadian legal and international cinematic precarity. Jutra the artist also wrote a sardonic short text in 1967, "How not to make a Canadian film." His first response to his own question synthesizes the reception he had got for *À tout prendre*: "Choose a non-commercial subject, so personal as to be indecent, banal, futile, immoral, sordid, etc." (Pâquet 1967). This bitterness may have been due in large part to the hurt he felt after the public disguised queerbaiting he faced, not only from critics and Arcand, but also from his collaborators in the decade after coming out in *À tout prendre*, his only venture in explicit autobiography.

He continued to follow precisely his own bitter and ironic advice for the rest of his

career, but never at the level and on the scale of *À tout prendre*. We can never know to what extent this bitterness was colored by his awareness of the monstrosity with which society would brand the erotic sensibility he expressed on celluloid, a closet within a closet, a closet that was *not* to be decriminalized by the Omnibus Bill the following year, 1969, with its emphasis on “adult” sexuality. Disappeared for the first time thirty years ago, Jutra the cowardly bisexual, the banal pedophile, the immoral artist, the inventive and brave man who confessed and still confesses, maintains this ethical relationship with us, the confessor spectator, in the wake of his second disappearance. We must take up this great responsibility toward his burden, his shame and his hope.

II

Before moving on to a direct focus on Jutra’s other films, let’s pause to reconnoiter in very general terms the other essential *international* context—and intertext—of *À tout prendre*. Jutra was plugged in transculturally better than any other Quebec filmmaker (alongside the film’s dedicatee and his mentor, the androphile gay animator McLaren). This most cosmopolitan of Quebec filmmakers belonged to two international tendencies that I would like to foreground.



A Chairy Tale, Norman McLaren and Claude Jutra, 1957

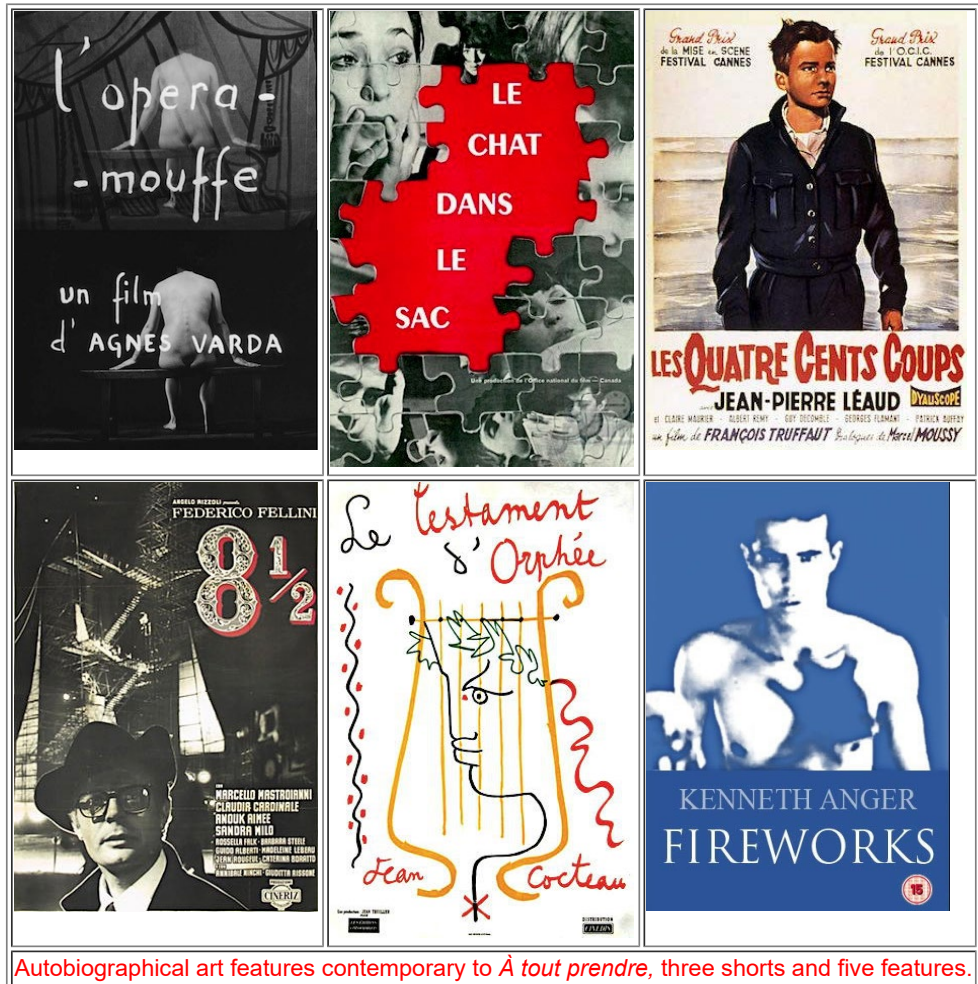
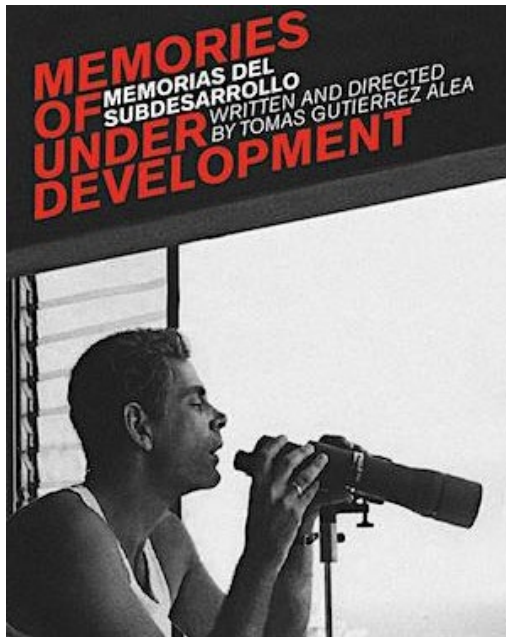


Opening Speech, Norman McLaren, 1969.

In the postwar period, the filming of oneself was a proliferating trope within art cinema on both sides of the Atlantic and even elsewhere. In the work of young filmmakers of the new waves here and there (as well as with some more established artists like another of Jutra’s mentors, the French filmmaker Jean Cocteau [1889–1963]), one often runs into more or less veiled confessionality, autobiography, self-portraiture, diaries and autofiction. *À tout prendre* is the only example that comes to mind, other than Cocteau’s 1960 *Le Testament d’Orphée*, released three years before his acolyte Jutra’s film, where the director is also the scriptwriter and the main actor (two decades after *Citizen Kane* [Orson Welles, 1941] and almost five before *J’ai tué ma mère* [Xavier Dolan, 2009]). We cannot afford to forget that the discreet avowal to desire for other men in Jutra’s film, as with contemporary and friend Kenneth Anger, also amounted to self-criminalization (six years before the decriminalizing Omnibus bill in Canada, five decades before decriminalization in the U.S.!): Critics and commentators of the period for the most part avoided reference to the homo scandal of *À tout prendre*, all the more since the transgression of same-sex eroticism was adroitly camouflaged by extramarital and interracial heterosexuality, abortion and other micro-transgressions (like the adulterous groping of brave actress Monique Mercure’s breasts, for example).

The series of surrogate suicide fantasies that punctuates the *À tout prendre* reminds us also that this kind of self-referential cinema is often also a cinema not only of shame but also of alienation and despair. It reminds us that Jutra’s self-reflexive tropes of sublimated desire and self-inflicted violence are common throughout his entire generation of thirty-something male filmmakers – and occasionally female filmmakers – who were doggedly struggling to make work

within the various national new waves emerging within several cultures around the planet at this time.



These dogged artistic struggles were inextricable from the context of the sexual revolution and the contribution of the international new waves to the dismantling of the U.S.-based Production Code, as I argued in 2006. Like Schlesinger, Anderson, Godard, Pasolini, Makavejev, Rocha, Oshima, and others, Jutra hiply and self-consciously deployed the familiar sexual tropes that expressed a range of affects from celebration to revolt to alienation. In tropes identifiable with male-authored art cinema of the sexual revolution, Jutra riffed on nudity, sexual gestures and behaviors and language, even sacrilege. Like his peers within the embryonic Canadian art cinema graphically caught up, in the “anti-repressive struggle” of the sexual revolution, Jutra welcomed the extension of cinematic language and the reinvention of audience and social implication that the sexual revolution implied. Jutra’s generation articulated a fierce attraction to the risks of sexual freedom, couching them as much in the safe exoticism of American iconography as in the stakes of domestic struggle, and yet figured them politically in terms of radical oppositionality and youth revolt.

At the same time Jutra and the others seemed to recognize the failures of traditional patriarchal masculinity, albeit with great tenderness and complicity for the wounded phallus, and to implicitly critique the inherited sex-gender system, offering an incipient problematization of women’s relation to the sexual revolution, and even posing the question of women’s sexual enfranchisement, autonomy and pleasure. Dehistoricized and allegorized, the heterosexual couple is indulged but ultimately bypassed by Jutra.[12] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

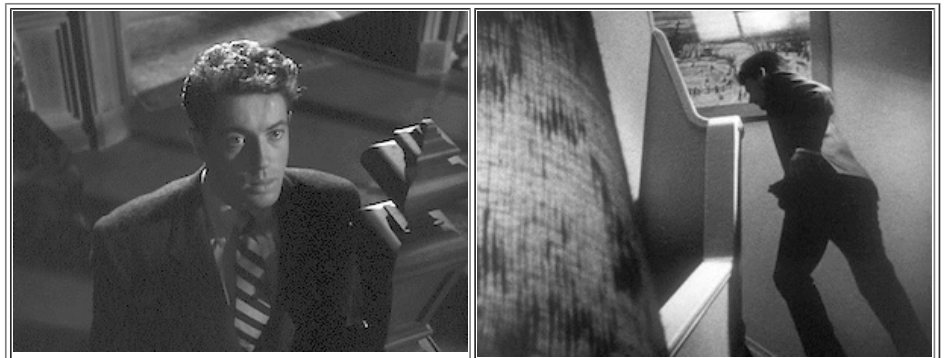
At the same time Jutra and some others offered explicit flashes or subtextual hints of the sexual diversity then assuming increasing visibility in the public and

cinematic spheres. Yet, instead of the defensive hyperbole of pornography, the euphoria of the avant-garde, or the blinkered opportunism and hesitation stampede of the commercial popular cinema, we find in this art cinema a cautious ambivalence. Historically positioned as young middle class male intelligentsia in the West of the sixties, ambivalent about the promise of sexual liberation, art cinema directors were often surprisingly restrained, just as concerned about the altered regulatory regimes as about the accompanying sexual shifts.

Their work vacillated between utopian and dystopian visions, between the normalization and destabilization of the hegemonic heterosexual couple, between a self-critical awareness of the cinema's centrality in the deployment of sexuality within modernity and a blinkered complicity in it. Collectively, their works exude a cinematic confidence that the sexual revolution is an ongoing, perhaps asymptotic process rather than a static fait accompli, an *incomplete* perverse implantation, a curve with inflection still being formed, a process where power and the body will continue to answer each other back.[13] As with his proto-queer contemporaries like Anderson, Pasolini and Schlesinger, Jutra's discreet queer subjectivity is much more direct in probing that trouble and in envisioning the space or spaces it opens for alternatives, a slate as open as these directors' enigmatic art film endings.

This leads me to the second international tendency that bears brief mention, the already gestating proto-queer cinema – even in the provincial backwaters of Montreal and Toronto!

From this point of view, Jutra is not so cowardly at all, taking risks in step with this international intertext of proto-queer experimental and art cinemas emerging at the start of the 1960s, pre-Stonewall prophetic articulations of forbidden cinematic fantasy and everyday life. Claude's confession, his moment of truth, echoes those of dozens of tortured young protagonists from these years, evoked by the film posters that I cite. The "coming out" ritual must be seen not only as a well-known narrative trope but also of course as a performative political ritual in the real world, always according to Sedgwick, having an "immense potency," the trigger of a "flow of power." (1990, 76-77) Except that we must clarify that Claude is not so much a "flaming creature," a biker, a prisoner, a queen, a hustler or an Orpheus, as a nervous young man, a "slightly cowardly" cisgendered middle-class bohemian, a real or pretend bisexual, garbed in a neat suit and a narrow tie, just like Guy (Farley Granger) in *Strangers on a Train* (Hitchcock, 1950)... which Jutra in fact cites!

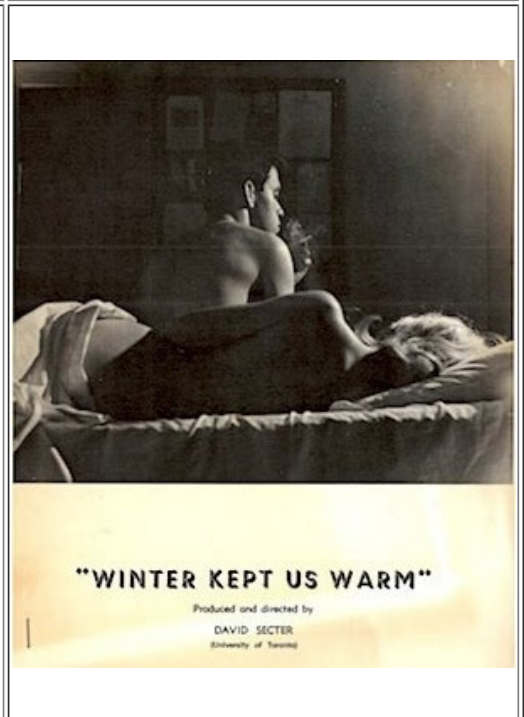
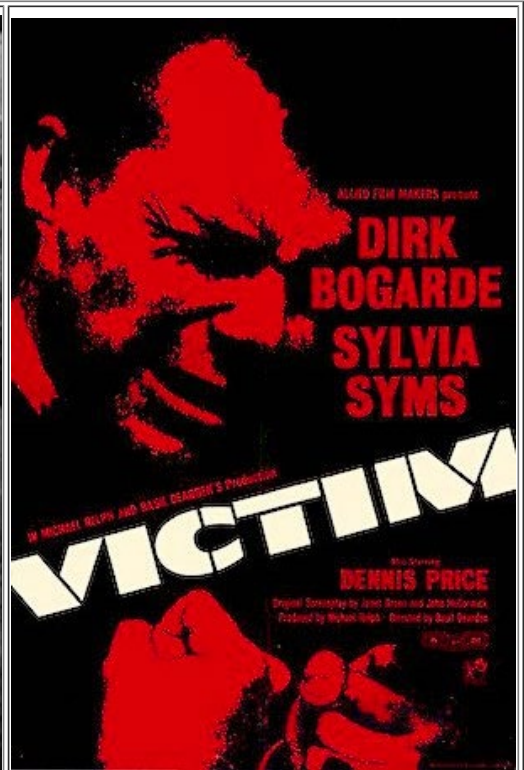


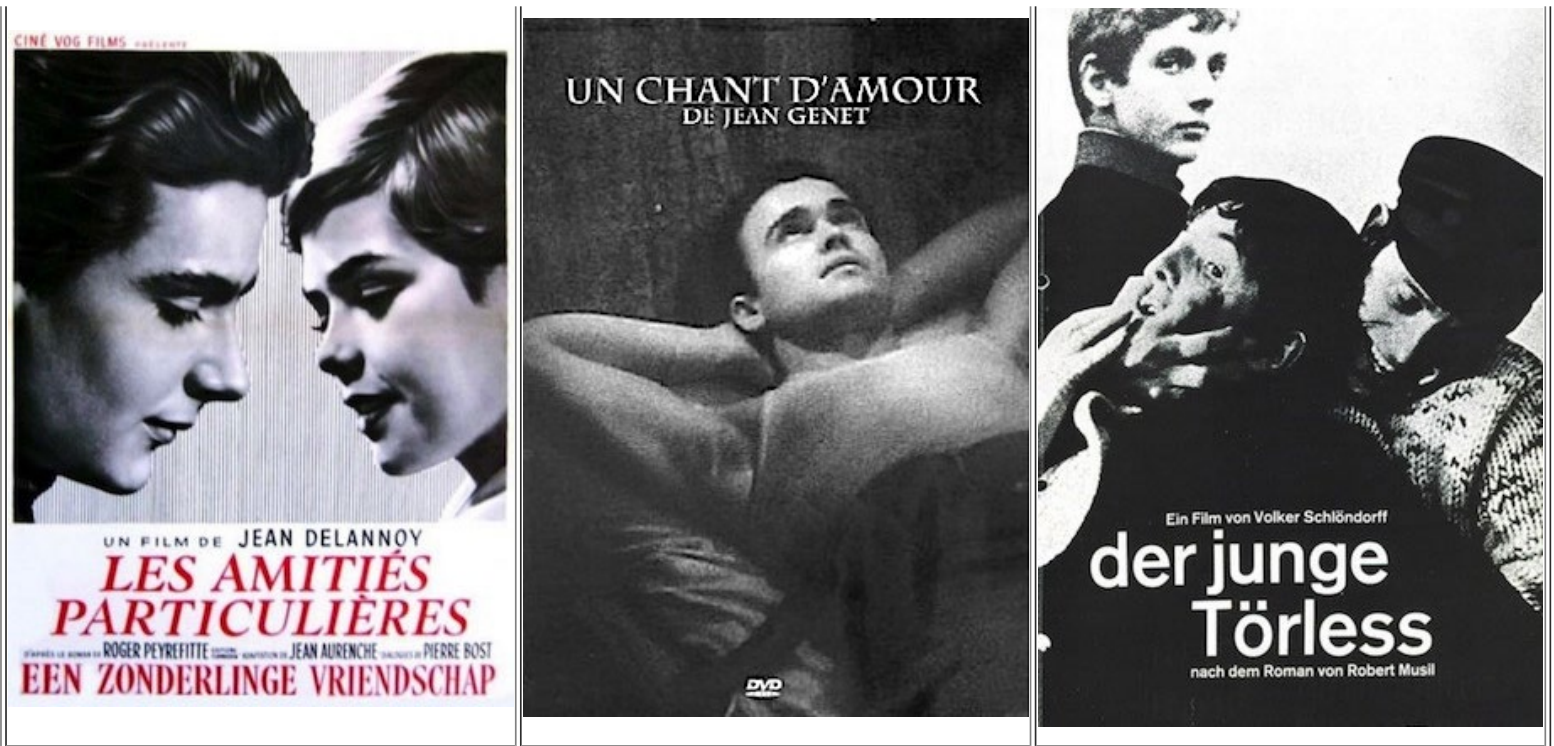
Guy and Claude climbing the oedipal stairs in respectively *Strangers on a Train* and *À tout prendre*.

Jutra transforms Hitchcock's sequence where Guy climbs the stairs in the dark towards the bedroom of the "father" into the sequence, which Arcand rightly considers oedipal, where Claude climbs towards his castrating mother's bedroom to confess; Jutra also borrows also from *Strangers on a Train* the frightening incident where the protagonist is fired upon by a child cowboy. No more than Guy, Claude would not exactly become a retroactive positive role model for queer activist cinephiles of the turn of the century!



KENNETH ANGER
SCORPIO RISING
 KUSTOM KAR KOMMANDOS • PUCE MOMENT





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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



"I don't know anybody who has been as happy I've been. And when I start describing "happiness", the amplitude and prolonged periods of happiness that I've known, especially in my teens – people don't believe that. I was so happy that it made me dizzy... There are recurrent themes in my films and one of them being certainly the idea of youth. Well, I just realized that. I told you before I had such a happy youth, maybe I'm still longing for it.... by making the films, I'm trying to go back to that period or to that – not so much that period – but to that way of being; the way it was to be young, which I enjoyed so much. And so those themes come back.... the loss of youth. And Mon oncle Antoine and Wow and Dreamspeaker is very much about that.... There are obvious things [that inspire me]. Like sexual things, my libido, and it drives me and if you can call that inspiration.... [C]ertainly my libido drives me to put things in films and there are things there that are quite clear to me and some not... , [sexuality]'s one of the most enjoyable things in life and if I have one regret in my life, well it is and it's not, is that I didn't enjoy it more when I was in my prime and when I should have been sexually, when I physiologically more active. But , I'm making up for that, I think, now. Now that all the guilt has gone. [I]t seems that I appreciate it that much because I knew what it was to be deprived from it because I knew how it was when it was forbidden and I knew what it was when every little satisfaction was counter-balanced by unbearable guilt, and all that. And, there again, [now] it comes too easy....it's much too good for the kids. They don't know what they have in their hands; no pun intended."

— Claude Jutra, 1979.[14] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



A Quebec film magazine one year later.
Séquences (2017): "Claude Jutra in his soul and conscience."

A year after the 2016 scandal and Jutra's second disappearance, a special Jutra section of another Quebec film magazine *Séquences* appeared: the tide had turned slightly.

Jutra's name may well have disappeared from film awards in both Toronto and Montreal, and from Quebec topography, but in fact a more measured conversation has ensued and his films are more available than ever (not an easy challenge for feature films of the 1960s and 70s).[15] Interestingly the word "lynching" continues to turn up, in both the section and independently online, for example in the voices of the film historian Heinz Weinmann and inveterate feminist playwright Denise Boucher (Weinmann; Cloutier).[16] The 2017 authors however did not address the scandal in detail, as if it was time to move on, rather revisited certain Jutra films in a not very interesting way. However, they made sure alongside Jutra's online defenders to disavow complicity with pedophilia of course. Of course. For the rest of this article I would like to think about my "of course."

My point is not to question the veracity of the testimonies of the two survivor individuals who came forward in the initial media brouhaha.[17] I take them at face value in the spirit of the times and what I hope is our steady collective political growth around sexual violence since the 1970s. Rather, I would like to revisit certain of Jutra's actual films that can be read as linked to the disappearance in order to illuminate them in the light of the fast-moving conversation.



As I observed in my book in great detail without ever having recourse to criminalizing labels, the pedophile sensibility is perceivable in almost all his films, in major ways in four works made in the key mid-career decade of the sexual revolution, ironically all produced for the state studios the NFB and the CBC respectively, and in two independent films I call the book-end films, produced at the very start and very end of his career.

First a breakdown of these six films in chronological order:



i) *Le Dément du lac Jean-Jeunes* (*The Madman of Lake Jean-Jeunes*, 1948). Jutra the teenager made this astonishing 40-minute fiction with his new birthday Bolex, his beloved scout troop, and his lifelong cameraman collaborator Michel Brault (two years his senior). Neglected by critics and largely unavailable, presumably as “immature” juvenilia, *Madman* offers a gorgeously photographed and accomplished narrative of a scout troop camping in the woods. The opening credits declare the film to be a campfire melodrama for scouts and it certainly is that, a *child abuse* melodrama. The scouts discover an isolated cabin where a strange drunken hermit figure is holed up in an abusive relationship with his son. Then the film's first person narrator, a 12 or 13-year-old scout, leads the troop's rescue of the boy from the father who eventually falls to his death from a cliff, pursued by the troop who have become a vigilante mob of astonishing violence.



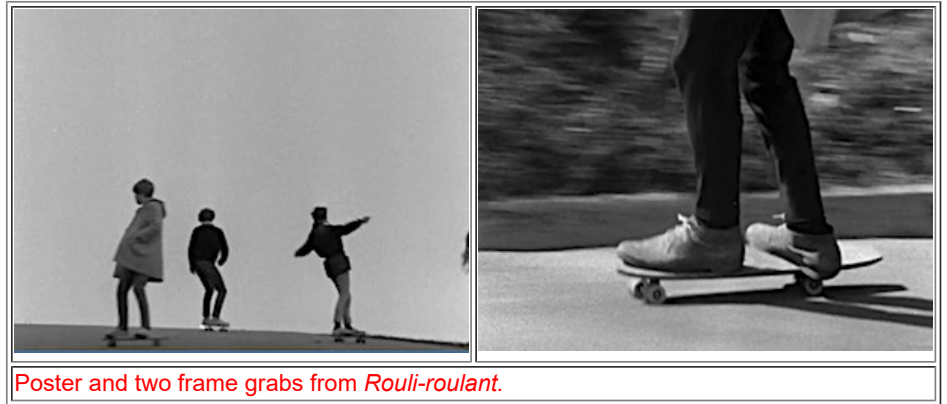
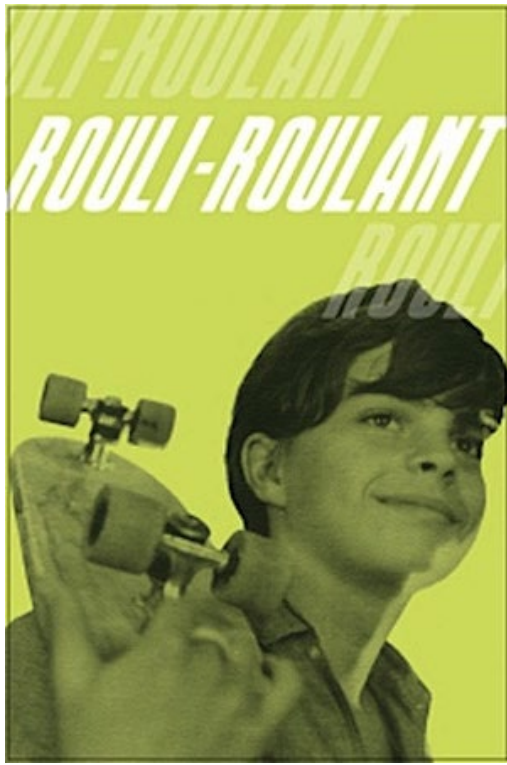
Three frames from juvenile scouting abuse melodrama *Le Dément du lac Jean-Jeunes*.

The film is also a lyrical black-and-white essay on the summer forest and on teenage male bonding and socialization, punctuated by not one but three collective bathing sequences, deliriously long and sensual, the *Lord of the Flies* going *Boys in the Sand*.... If we cannot call such a sophisticated amateur film naïve, we can perhaps use the word “uninhibited,” for the beefcake – or should I say calfcake? – is blatant with the scouts rushing into the forest streams for ritual baptismal communion at the blow of a whistle, even in the midst of orphan rescue (the narrator/protagonist performs his own striptease for the camera early on, throwing each garment in turn from off camera into the frame).

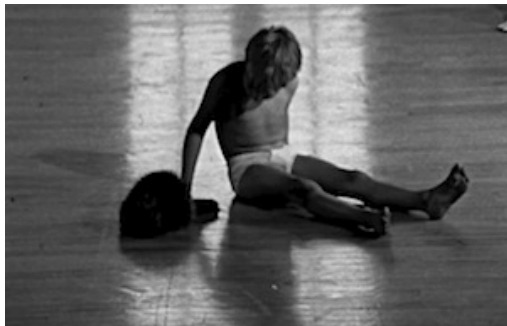
The abusive family (the abuse is physical violence, not spelled out as sexual) is a demonic opposite of this idealized scout troop, that same-sex parental substitute and institution of male socialization, but the narrator's voice-over reference to the passive son-victim muddies the neatness of the opposition: “He must be his son, he seemed to love him even if he was brutal.” At the end, their mission of normalization completed, the scouts abandon their now domesticated orphan at a foster home of stultifying tranquility.

ii) *Rouli-roulant* (*The Devil's Toy*, 1966). This documentary short about teen skateboarders in Montreal is a wry and self-reflexive nonfiction essay on the phenomenon, especially the adolescent protagonists facing the cops who are reinforcing municipal regulations banning the devices from sidewalks and roads (but who are on their best behavior in front of the cameras). Despite the a brief self-parodic demonstration of the construction and uses of the object that was just then being popularized beyond the boundaries of California, there is very little exposition in this gorgeously lyrical, even balletic, poem to homosocial agility and grace (several girlfriends and female skateboarders are in the picture without undermining the overwhelmingly male-gendered character of this world) – accompanied by a catchy song crooned by Jutra's friend Geneviève Bujold (12 years his junior, soon to be the star of his most ambitious film, the historical epic *Kamouraska*, 1973).





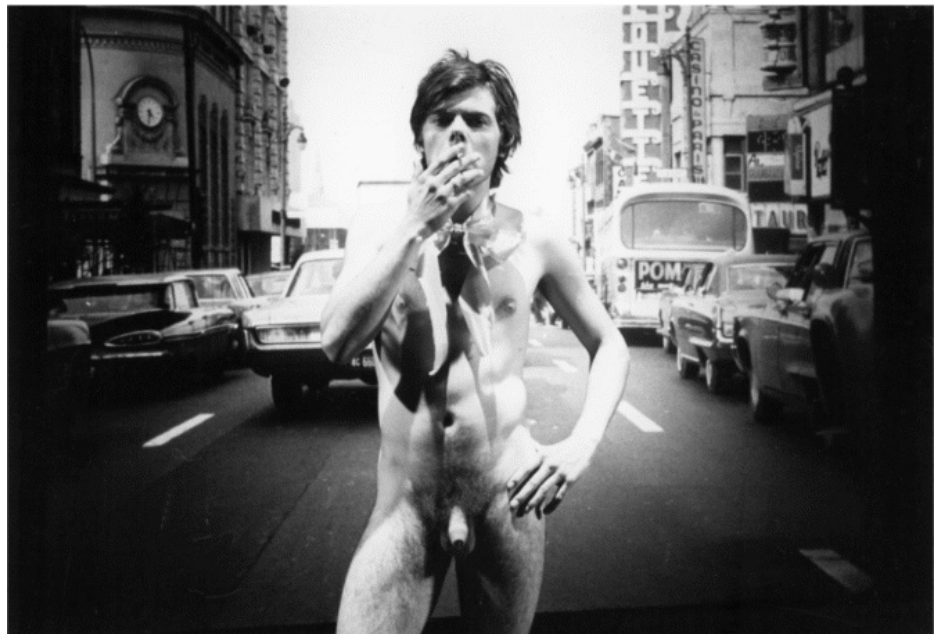
Poster and two frame grabs from *Rouli-roulant*.



Wow (1969): frame grab from porcupine memory episode.

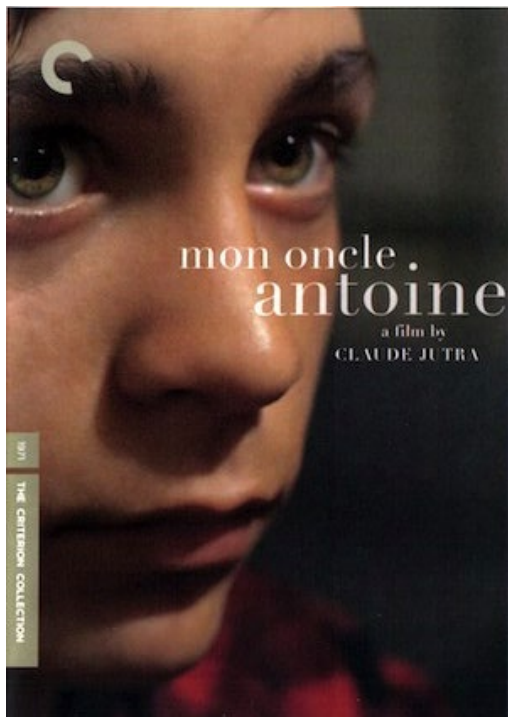
The film's epigraph, borrowed at the start of this article, literally applied to the processions of athletic, handsome, entitled youths floating through the streets and parklands of the wealthy enclave of Westmount, might also be an echo of the youth culture and impending "summer of love" that Jutra had certainly encountered in a recent teaching stint at UCLA (where he taught Jim Morrison!), and might of course stretch far beyond such narrow "between-the-lines" readings to embrace a more autobiographical register.

iii) *Wow* (1969). In this hybrid feature Jutra facilitated Québécois teens to direct dramatized cinematic narratives of their own fantasies about their lives and the world, interspersed with grave black-and-white interviews with the subjects about the world, sex and drugs and authority. Jutra's most focused work on the 1960s youth rebellion, *Wow* has its predictable share of beefcake of course – even its public flaunting. The poster notwithstanding, male subjects outnumber female subjects six to three (and also predictably in this [upper?] middle-class universe, no class or ethnic diversity enters the picture). *Wow* diverges from its predominantly ephebocentric focus in only one climactic episode where pot-smoking Pierre fondly remembers his childhood encounter with a pet porcupine. The reminiscence is dramatized in sensuous black and white with the camera caressing an underwear-clad boy, perhaps five or six, as he caresses the animal on a gleaming hardwood floor.



Wow, poster and production still.

iv) *Mon Oncle Antoine* (1971) is the best known and most loved of Jutra's work. This stature is due in part to its circulation in both languages, well managed by the NFB for almost a half century, in contrast to the erratic handling of the independent features *À tout prendre* and *Kamouraska*. Accessibility ensured in no small way that it would remain firmly entrenched for decades as number one on all-time Canadian ten best lists. This period feature follows a male teen coming of age in rural industrial Quebec within an extended non-consanguineal family that runs the local general store/undertaker salon. Silent, voyeuristic Benoît awakens to mortality and adult perfidy, but most importantly to sexual desire, feelings, and relations, whose complexity suddenly brings tears to his playmate Carmen's eyes.

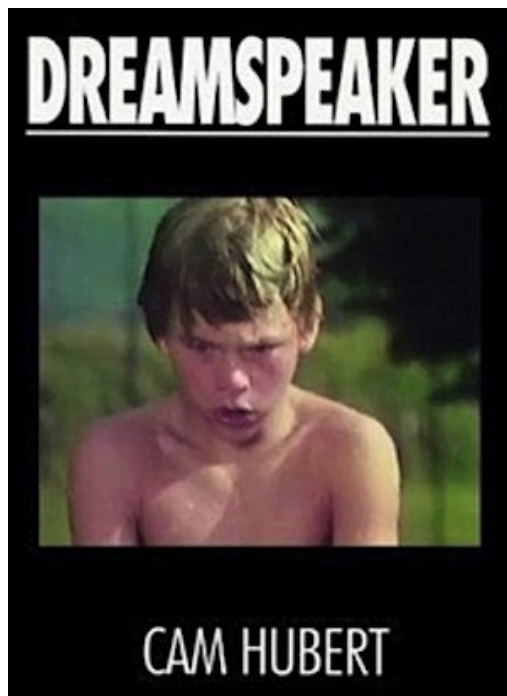


Mon oncle Antoine: poster and adolescent flirtation episode watched by creepy Fernand (Claude Jutra).

v) *Dreamspeaker* (1975) is the least known of Jutra's major works, especially in Quebec, partly because it is in English, but mostly because this 75-minute made-for-television feature has been unavailable in either language for decades.

Another melodrama, this Vancouver Island yarn follows Peter, an emotionally disturbed and orphaned blond pubescent boy who escapes his juvenile “facility” to spend a northwoods idyll with an indigenous elder-storyteller and his twenty-something adopted “son,” a friendly, mute woodcarver-muscleman. This mentor pair is an idealized alternative all-male family who feed and clothe the boy, pump up his self-worth, teach him therapeutic native lore and take him skinnydipping. Of course it can’t last, the trio are denounced by an urban handicraft dealer and the Mounties burst in to puncture their rhapsody. While the justice system may well recognize the men as Peter’s “natural parent” equivalents for visiting privileges in the “facility,” the elder dies of a broken heart after the boy is taken away and the other two younger ones follow him violently by their own hands.

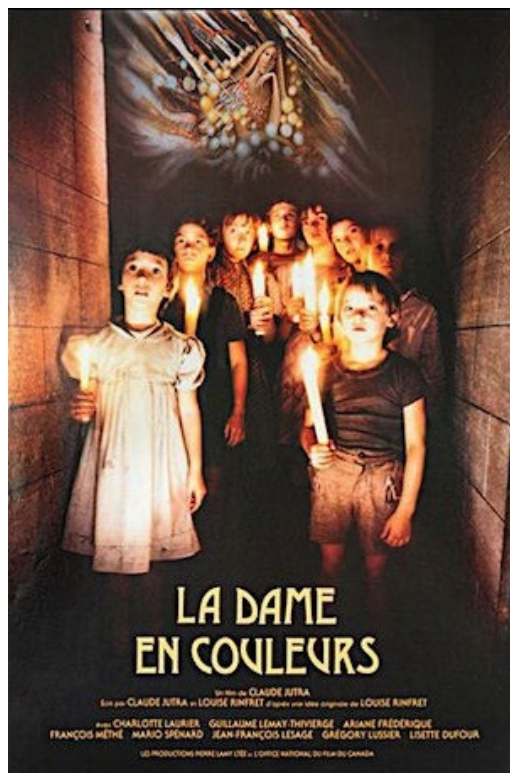
White settler writer Cam Hubert, also known as Anne Cameron, responsible for the *Dreamspeaker* script and novelization, was married to the magnificent indigenous actor Jacques Hubert who played the mute woodcarver. If we needed to diagnose the lamentable current unfamiliarity of this work, one would have to attribute it less to its now-evident risqué undercurrents, than to the willful negligence of its institutional rights-owner the CBC (it has been totally unavailable since the NFB dropped it from its 16mm catalogue over three decades ago at least) and perhaps even to the slight embarrassment that could be sparked by its settler-authored indigenous narrative (which however needs no defense in its original context in my opinion[18]).



Dreamspeaker: novelization cover and two frame grabs from skinny dipping/picnic episode.

vi) *La Dame en couleurs* (*The Lady of Colors*), 1984. Jutra’s last film is a period melodrama set in the same vague dark past of Quebec history – before revolutions both quiet and sexual – as *Mon oncle Antoine*. Another troop, this time not scouts but boy and girl orphans sequestered in an asylum run by nuns, seek freedom in the tunnels beneath the fortress-like institution. There they bond with an adult inmate, a kind of resident artist, a “dabbler” who has filled the underground with Chagall-esque murals – a part Jutra had written for himself but which the producers refused to allow him to perform for lack of star-power and growing evidence of his illness. The children are even more precocious sexually than Benoît and Carmen, and their ringleader, 15-year-old Agnès, even tries to seduce her own special nun-mentor by reading to her from *The Song of Solomon*! All eventually escape except for Agnès.

When I say that these six films are Jutra the pedophile’s most “explicit,” I mean that textual analysis for all six readily isolates idealizing, eroticizing, empathizing constructions of their frankly beautiful heroes (pubescent male heroes, that is, or post-pubescent in the case of *Wow*, and both male and female in all the films except those two taking place in homosocial woodland worlds, *Madman* and *Dreamspeaker*). Jutra explores the kids’ corporeal and moral agency and autonomy, their struggles against a harsh, violent and oppressive world as they



mature, their engagements with learning and sharing within surrogate families and complex non-familial adult-child relations – in the context of tragic, rich, beautiful, complex, enduring and yes ambiguous narratives of nurturing and betrayal, abuse and revolt, resilience and mortality.

Bathing and other corporeal rituals are plentiful. The skinny-dipping sequence in *Dreamspeaker* in which the hero Peter, slightly younger than Benoît, frolics with his twenty-something mute muscleman mentor, endlessly splashing and leaping in the idyllic sylvan pool, urged on by both characters' elder mentor onshore, astonishes the post-1980 viewer. Its bold, lush and unstinting frankness would not be allowed over the last generations: its sacramental role leads to it being reprised at the end of the film as a postmortem flashback (all three characters die with gruesome explicitness), anticipating other melodramas climaxing in “Lazarus endings” where the dead come back to life and party with the living, from *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* (1983) to *Longtime Companion* (1989) to *Paris is Burning* (1990) to *Les Misérables* (2012). One might make similar reflections on the fascination in all six Jutra pedophile films with same-sex play, combat and pursuit, the rituals of suffering and awakening of the growing and learning child.



Clearly all these films' scopophilic fantasies privilege male subject/objects, most blatantly for example the graceful, agile skateboarders. I say subject-objects because the characters inevitably return the gaze, caught up in voyeuristic engagement with the adult world, the filmmaker in intense and complacent identification with their look. Benoît, altarboy and general store and funeral parlor errand-boy, whose shortness and prettiness makes him more boylike than his recently changed voice might imply and allow him to get away with more transgressions than most, not only plays sexual games with his peer Carmen, another castoff from the nuclear family who is an inmate of the establishment, but also spies on all of the adults in his world, the adulterers, the drunks, the blasphemers, the local bourgeoisie, both anglophone (the capitalist bosses, racist and patronizing) and francophone (the wife of the notary, treated like royalty by the storekeepers because she indulgently buys the most expensive corset in the catalogue and tries it on on the other side of the keyhole from lecherous Benoît). As the sexual revolution made its impact increasingly, and the walls of censorship crumbled, the films became increasingly astonishingly frank about childhood and adolescent erotic agency, and sexuality in general.

Adult mentorship had been a benign, even positive trope in Jutra's earlier documentaries about education like *Jeunesse musicale* (1956) and *Comment savoir* (1966), aligning the idealist openness of children and teenagers with the beneficent nurturing of adults. The trope would be increasingly problematized as the director matured. The Age of Aquarius and the sexual revolution increasingly ushered in the utter incompetence or blind destructiveness of adult authority, for

La Dame en couleurs: DVD cover and three frames of juvenile sexual agency and intergenerational interaction.

example the cops who clamp down on the idealized Westmount skateboarders in *Devil's Toy*, or the range of authority figures excoriated in *Wow*, legal, religious, law enforcement, educational, parental and so on. Benoît is stuck with a drunken and incapacitated guardian uncle and a frivolous other adult male role model Fernand (played interestingly by Jutra, and constructed as a perfidious adulterer and creepy voyeur in a process of unfiltered brash confessionality). Male adult mentorship in *Dreamspeaker* is loving, wise, and supportive but also futile, so much so that the set at the end of the film is littered with almost as many bodies as *Hamlet*, the boy hero and his adult non-consanguineal kin succumbing bloodily to the scriptwriter's nowhere-else-to-go.

Jutra's kids always thrive, as least for a time, in their heterotopic world, whether sylvan or urban or underground, with multiple variations of mentorship or familial mentorship both good and failed/oppressive, and with tropes of rescue and failed rescue: *Dreamspeaker* shows by far the bleakest failure, but *La Dame en couleurs* with its doomed heroine Agnès is close behind (her nun mentor has escaped to the secular world, but the once vibrant teenager is sentenced to lifetime incarceration in the asylum).

In this broader view of the documentaries and features as complementary visions of these same processes of growth, education, and socialization, one thing is incontrovertible: Jutra's sense of these processes, the most profound within two Canadian national cinemas in which youth films have long been a privileged genre, is channeled and deepened through the physicality of his pubescent heroes and through his eroticization of their pedagogic interactivity – and through Jutra's way of inevitably annulling and shattering the idealizations he has so lovingly crafted.

Jutra's bookend films, *Le dément du lac Jean-Jeunes* and *La Dame en couleurs*, situated at the very start and the very end of his filmography thirty-five years apart, both melodramas about kids and their elders, deal with touching directness in not-so-coincidental symmetry and felicitousness with pubescent sociality and desire and juvenile sexual agency. I am sure that the impressionable young Jutra like everyone else had seen the most successful play in 20th century Quebec theatre, *La Petite Aurore enfant martyre*. This over-the-top pop melodrama told the famous story a motherless girl tortured to death by her evil stepmother, which never left the boards in Quebec between 1921 and 1951 and was soon adapted into the biggest feature film hit (1952) of the pre-Quiet Revolution *grande noirceur* (Great Darkness) period. Did the evil stepmother transmutate, on some unconscious level, into the vicious yet tragic abusive hermit father in *Madman*?

In his interviews Jutra almost always remembered an intense and blissful childhood (see epigraph). Surely this affect of nostalgia and loss explains the rich complexity of his portraits of kids coming of age, his erotic apperception of their growing bodies deepened by an intense identification with them. Perhaps this complexity explains how the erotic dimension of Jutra's portraits and narratives could be disavowed by generations of critics.

Disavowal and avoidance also characterize the literature on Jutra to this day – even in the wake of the scandal, as we have seen. Both the English and the French literature, for all their instrumentalism in quietly maintaining the heritage, are selective in touching on the themes that interest me in this article, continuing to avoid what is on the screen. The only monograph in English, Jim Leach's *Claude Jutra Filmmaker* (1999), is so subsumed by the Quebec national problematic of this Montreal filmmaker who made as many as eight English-language films in English Canada and was far from the most vocal spokesperson for the *indépendantiste* cause, is so perfunctory in treating the oeuvre's queerness, that its readers must have felt especially blindsided by the eruption 17 years later.

In conclusion, I would like to think about canon, archive and empire, or the political responsibility of the queer film historian – in 2017. The last queer film critic to use the word “responsibility” in a title of an article was Robin Wood in 1977, and this is the 40th anniversary (Wood, 1977). Robin’s argument is



Claude Jutra's blissful childhood.

grounded mostly in this article in an auteurist tweaking of the canon, and Renoir, Hawks, and Bergman are all seen through brave, rose-colored glasses. My undeniable focus on the auteur – the oeuvre and the scandal who were Jutra – may seem to build on Wood's heritage. Like Wood, I am prodded by textual pleasures, challenges and dilemmas, and ponder the ethical and political responsibility of the queer film historian – in 2006 and in 2017 – in the maintenance of the living [film] archive, in the modulation or defense or subversion of the queer [or national] canon.

But let's get to the point, let's go further: it is my responsibility to pierce what Jon Davies has called the "black hole into which any measured speech about consent, pleasure, and desire in intergenerational relationships seem to vanish" (Davies 2007) and I have done my best through the above largely textual operations. Even more importantly it is my responsibility – and all of our responsibilities – to situate these textual operations within a vision of a larger project of societal "liberation," as with Wood, and to call for, to engage in, to insist on, a far-ranging cultural and political conversation about intergenerational love, refusing the black hole. This conversation will engage with the meanings of sex, sex work and the criminalization thereof, sexual assault, sexual harassment, consent and age of consent, the sexual child, juvenile sexual agency, the queer child, sexual mentorship and pedagogy, sex education, the regulation, suppression and punishment of dissident sexuality in our culture, witch hunts and sex panics, the prison industrial complex and the carceral state, the war on sex offenders, and along the way the genocidal[19] campaign against pedophiles and boylover culture.

In short, the time has come to tell the truth, to take off the gloves, to shine light into the culture's black holes, to lose the delicacy and nuance and irrelevance of academic insider address... and defiantly use the word "pedophilia" – not as symptom or forensic evidence – but as artistic dynamic intrinsic to Jutra's and many others' work, as intrinsic to our battle to maintain Jutra's canonical status within Canadian, Quebec, queer and postwar international new wave/art/documentary cinemas. The time has come to do so – not *in spite of* (as in Griffith's white supremacism or Heidegger's anti-semitism or Polanski's and Nate Parker's sexual assault conviction or non-conviction) – but, as with Plato/Socrates, Abu Nuwas, Lewis Carroll, J.M. Barrie, André Gide, Benjamin Britten, Hakim Bey, and Michael Jackson, etc., etc., ... *because of*.

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Notes

1. I am borrowing as my epigraph the dedication used by Claude Jutra for his short documentary *Rouli-roulant* (*The Devil's Toy*, 1966). [[return to page 1](#)]
2. All translations from the French in this article are by the author unless otherwise noted.
3. I am aware of the sensitivity around grafting this term onto this situation, away from its historic context, and do so simply to evoke the post-scandal French-language debates in Quebec, which frequently heard the late filmmaker's defenders use "*lynchage*" figuratively to denounce the hasty extirpation of Jutra's name and reputation from the culture.
4. I was 21 in 1969, already a criminal, when Justin Trudeau's father Pierre initiated the decriminalization of sodomy between two adults of 21 years or more in private; I was 40 in 1988 when another Liberal government lowered the age of consent for homosexual relations from 21 to 18 (in comparison to the heterosexual age of consent then in effect of 14 years). The 1988 change of the age of consent retroactively decriminalized my primary relation of the day with a man born in 1962 who had become my partner at the age of 20, a relationship to which he could not legally consent.
5. To use a term borrowed from Dr. Kinsey by Gayle Rubin (1984).
6. Here is not the place to comment on that contradiction in Canadian film culture, which dictated that no francophone [or anglophone?] intervener in the Jutra affair had read my full analysis, rather only a fragmentary excerpt that had been translated into French in the online journal *Nouvelles vues sur le cinéma québécois* and cited in the incriminating biography (Waugh 2004, http://www.nouvellesvues.ulaval.ca/fileadmin/nouvelles_vues/fichiers/Numero2/parler_waugh_1.pdf).
7. I am grateful to Toronto psychiatrist Dr. Frank Sommers for having provided an ambitious and lengthy interview he conducted in English with Jutra about his creative process in 1979, from which I have excerpted my two epigraphs of that year. © Dr. Frank Sommers, 360 Bloor St. West, Toronto.
8. See the amazingly prophetic and risqué proto-feminist short essay film *La beauté même* by the NFB editor Monique Fortier, 1964. Available for streaming on the French-language NFB site https://www.onf.ca/film/beaute_meme/. I encourage even readers who cannot follow the French narration to explore this amazing film.
9. The bilingual Leonard Cohen (1934-2016), Jutra's contemporary fellow habitué of Montreal bohemia, then known principally as a poet, took on the job of versioning *À tout prendre* in English.
10. Thanks to the Cinémathèque québécoise site for this bit of synopsis:

<http://www.cinematheque.qc.ca/tout-prendre>

11. My translation is taken from the original French version. Leonard Cohen's 1965 English version is abbreviated and slightly loose: "I do not say yes but I do not deny it either. With those woman's hands of hers, Johanne unfolded my confession and I gave her that secret ancient as my first memories, without pain, without shame. And so this longing imperial and unsatisfied longing has taken at last the form of hope."

12. In this argument, and occasionally elsewhere I am self-cannibalizing my 2006 analysis. [return to page 3]

13. I am of course using the concepts introduced by Foucault in his brief and dismissive discussions of the sexual revolution (Foucault 1979).

14. I am grateful to Toronto psychiatrist Dr. Frank Sommers for having provided an ambitious and lengthy interview he conducted in English with Jutra about his creative process in 1979, from which I have excerpted my two epigraphs. © Dr. Frank Sommers, 360 Bloor St. West, Toronto. [[return to page 3](#)]

15. The Cinematheque québécoise, the organization that holds the rights for *À tout prendre* offers a very rich online focus on this film (collections.cinematheque.qc.ca/en/dossiers/a-tout-prendre/) and in August 2017, 18 months after removing Jutra's name and photo from their main screening room, penitently offered a summer screening selection of five Jutra features (*À tout prendre*, *Mon oncle Antoine*, *Comment savoir...*, *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire*, *La dame en couleurs*). For access to Jutra's oeuvre consult the accompanying note to this special section.

16. Weinmann (2016) also used the term "mémoricide."

17. Of these, one, the anonymous "Jean," alleged continual sexual assault for a decade beginning at the age of 6, facilitated by Jutra's friendship with his family, and causally linked this experience to his dysfunctional and troubled adulthood; the non-anonymous other, Bernard Dansereau, alleged to have received Jutra's advances at the age of 11 or 12 but to have successfully rebuffed them, and then to have gone on to collaborate as an adult filmmaker with his erstwhile would-be abuser (Pilon-Larose 2016a, 2016b).

18. Contact the author for "advice" on accessing this film for research purposes.

19. In response to the query in solidarity of a friend/colleague as to whether the word "genocidal" here might be "misplaced," I offered a tirade about "concentration camps, permanent sex offender registries, civil commitments with no time limit, chemical castrations, erasure of history and identity, destruction of archives, vigilante mobs, forced clandestinity and exile, violation of rights of freedom of assembly and speech etc." This footnote was spawned to justify my word choice. In contrast to the ample archives of genocide kept by the Nazis, the Turks and the Canadian Indian Residential School system, documentation of this genocide is de facto and de jure largely absent because it is illegal. However, readers seeking further information may begin by consulting Thomas K Hubbard and Beert Verstraete, eds., *Censoring Sex Research: The Debate over Male Intergenerational Relations* (Routledge 2013). For accounts of the destruction of archives and U.S. resistance to sex offender legal abuse, see these online clippings:

https://www.ipce.info/ipceweb/Library/guide_brong_01feb_eng.htm and
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform_Sex_Offender_Laws,_Inc.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Foundational fictions

by [Bill Marshall](#)

Excerpt from chapter two of Marshall's *Quebec National Cinema* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001). *Jump Cut* editors' additions in brackets.



Two films from 1963: From the direct cinema rural "truth" of *Pour la suite du monde* (Perreault and Brault) to a problematization of identity in Jutra's urban *À tout prendre*

The construction of the canon of directors in Deleuze's cinema books is open to some questioning. As far as 'Third World' figures are concerned, his choices are somewhat limited to those (usually one per country) adopted by *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1960s, hence the choice of [Pierre] Perrault—*Pour la suite du monde* [For the Ones to Come] (with Michel Brault) 1963, *Le pays de la terre sans arbre* [The Country of the Treeless soil] 1980, *La bête lumineuse* [The Shimmering Beast] 1982—as representative of Quebec. He might instead have alighted upon *À tout prendre* [Take It All or All Things Considered], shot in 1961-3 and released in 1964, which revels in 'the minor', but, paradoxically, a minor mode constructed from within the urban bourgeoisie (and whose main protagonist speaks impeccable metropolitan French). This quasi-autobiographical piece, produced in the private sector, portrays the affair between filmmaker Claude (Claude Jutra), and a Black model, Johanne (Johanne Harrelle), who is still living with her (estranged and unseen) husband. The vicissitudes of the relationship—first encounter, obsession, other dalliances, Johanne's pregnancy, subsequent rejection by Claude, and miscarriage [1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]
—are less important than the way the film combines formal experimentation with a sustained problematization of identity itself. Where *Pour la suite du monde*, in one reading at least, seemed to be producing a 'truth' and seeking to uncover an 'authenticity' beyond the world of appearances, *À tout prendre* joyously undercuts the 'self' on which the film would seem narcissistically to centre. At the time however, the film was largely greeted with incomprehension, and seen as having little to do with the emerging assertion of Quebec identity associated with the Quiet Revolution.[1a]

From the opening scene in which Claude gets ready for the party, the spectator is confronted with the fragility of the 'self'. The 'realism' of body details in the shower (such as washing feet) combines with a montage of shots of Claude in various guises in front of the mirror, ending with him firing a gun so that it shatters and fragments. The self-proclaimed 'quest' of the film is to "get rid of my youth and of the characters [*personnages*] inside me". The film proceeds to address this longing, but ultimately Claude discovers that there is no unified identity for him to step into. In fact, 'Je est un autre', 'I is another' (the quotation from Rimbaud's *Lettre du voyant* of 1871 which Deleuze uses to describe the non-identical in time and the non-identity of image and concept, and which he sees manifesting itself in Rouch's practice in *Moi, un noir* [Me, a Black Man]). The way forward is through fabulation.



The fragility of the 'self': mirrors and self-fiction in *À tout prendre*.

The style of *À tout prendre*, and the combination of cultural inputs it contains, testifies to that play of instability, plurality and difference. The dedications of the title sequence are to Jean Rouch, and indeed the film owes much to *le direct* (mobile camera, lack of aestheticism in the shots, sense of immediacy), particularly the experimental end he represents, but also to Norman McLaren. Jutra had worked with McLaren at the NFB on the short *A Chairy Tale* of 1957, with its use of stop action animation; the representation of the guns firing in Claude's fantasies in *À tout prendre* obviously recall McLaren's animation technique of scratching directly on the celluloid.



Jutra in *A Chairy Tale/ Il était une chaise* (1957)

Jutra had first met François Truffaut, who makes a cameo appearance in *À tout prendre*, at a film festival in Tours in 1957 in which both *A Chairy Tale* and Truffaut's *Les Mistons* [The Mischief Makers] 1957 were entered. We shall discuss subsequently the relations between early Quebec cinema and the French *nouvelle vague*. Suffice it to say here that aspects of *À tout prendre* are reminiscent of both *Les Quatre Cents Coups* [The 400 Blows] 1959 (Claude's problems are those of a man in his early 30s still negotiating the identity crises of adolescence, bereft of a solid place in a society he can believe in) and *A bout de souffle* [Breathless] 1960 (for its formal playfulness). For Deleuze, the *nouvelle vague* was a key expression in cinema of 'the power of the false', in which the 'form of truth' was replaced by forces and powers, of life and of cinema.

À tout prendre combines immediacy and self-reflexivity, and so a promise of 'truth' or 'the real' is constantly undermined by a dazzling array of rapid camera movements, rapid montage, extensive use of zoom, freeze frame and slow motion, discontinuous interruptions from Claude's fantasy life, a soundtrack that veers from synchronous dialogue to music to Claude's stream of consciousness and his ironic voice-over commentary, and of course the film within the film, the love story Claude is shooting. Plot – the anecdotal 'real' of the film—is periodically suspended in favour of falsifying narration and sequences of 'pure' spectacle, in particular what Deleuze calls a *gestus* (250) of Claude's body (a sequence has him performing various gaits, and then a return to 'the true' is announced – in fact to his film shoot).[2]



Pure spectacle: Johanne's creole song "Choucounne" in *À tout prendre*.

The formal and thematic strategy is dovetailed in, for example, the scene of Claude and Johanne's first encounter. Longer takes than average for the film are used to portray Johanne's rendition at the party of the creole song, "Choucounne". (This scene is an unused sequence from the student film by Denys Arcand, Denis Héroux and Stéphane Venne, *Seul ou avec d'autres* [Alone or With Others] 1962). This contrast, along with that struck with the chatter of the (white, middle-class) gathering, suggests an 'authenticity' which is undermined not only by its status as performance, but by the cut (Claude's point of view?) of an increasingly out of focus female figure, who may or may not be Johanne, standing up to sway to the music. This is preceded and followed by shots of Claude looking at her. Significantly, he asks a partygoer what her name is: "Johanne" flashes up twice on a blank screen. That particular question thus provides an unambiguous answer, but *who she is* is a quite different matter. Johanne will prove to be, in a familiar treatment in Western culture, ungraspable as love object, but her identity is also a performance, as she confesses later to Claude that her status as 'Haitian' is a fiction, a performance she has learned, for she is in fact an orphan from Quebec. The cuts in that first scene to Claude looking, the last in extreme close-up, establish an equivalence in ambiguity of the two individuals and their interaction to come.



Out of focus: Johanne at the white bohemian party.

The gaze of Claude upon Johanne is thus not to be characterized as the standard male heterosexual gaze of mainstream Hollywood and even art cinema, fixing the threatening female body as an object of voyeurism or fetishism. Claude's position is continuously undermined by what we might term the apprenticeship of difference that Johanne forces him to experience. This is the case in terms of race (she explicitly refuses to be exoticized), her own identity masquerade, in the troubling scenes when Claude's gaze is returned (notably by Johanne and Barbara [Monique Mercure]), and most notably in the acknowledgement of his own homosexual inclinations that she in fact provokes. Claude's 'identity' or rather *plurality* of identities, is thus predicated on a dialogue with otherness, a becoming-other. This becoming the Other can lead Jutra/the film to embrace the process of decolonization, as in his documentary *Le Niger jeune république* [Niger, Young Republic] of 1961, shots of which are inserted into *À tout prendre*.



However, the lessons for Quebec are that any national struggle must be predicated on provisional and not full or unified notions of identity. This is the point missed by contemporary commentators such as Denys Arcand, who identified national maturity with heterosexual relations with "one's own", "women of the real, of the everyday": "There we find, I think, an unconscious refusal to coincide with one's collective self." [3] At the end of the film, Claude walks past graffiti for "Québec libre" with the preceding voiceover, at the end of the affair with Johanne, suggesting "Il faut penser à autre chose/We have to think about something else".

Claude's gaze upon Johanne: not the standard male heterosexual gaze.

The implication is that such a project is worth pursuing, but is qualified and tempered by what occurs in the film. Notably, *À tout prendre* ends not with that shot but with a gag sequence fantasizing about Claude's possible suicide and representing his departure for elsewhere.

In an interview later in the decade, Jutra made explicit his attitude to any kind of committed cinema:

"I believe in ideas: the right of a people to self-government, each person's need for a national and cultural identity. But, as I get carried away with enthusiasm, I can't help thinking that the worst collective crimes were committed in the name of nationalism. This contradiction tortures me and it is to this contradiction that I am committed."

His project is thus to "define the contradictions, and share the anguish".[4]

The fact that *À tout prendre* can be co-opted only with considerable difficulty for a political project extends also to identity politics. The refreshing—and astonishing for 1963—treatment of homosexuality is far from constituting an "identity" (Johanne's phrase, "do you like boys?", is based on *acts*). It prompts Claude to *act*, by, it is heavily implied, seducing the lead actor of his film, but the fact that gay assertion goes no further is attributable not only to the historical context.[5] As we have seen, the film cannot be read as a straightforward assertion of 'Quebec' either. Its treatment of its identity position(s) is decidedly, and triumphantly, 'minor'.

The criticism of the film's "narcissism" is also somewhat misplaced (Brady). The equation of homosexuality and narcissism is a highly debatable amalgamation of Freud and the 'common-sense' view that since lesbians and gay men desire the same sex they must be narcissistic. As I have argued, far from being a withdrawal into the self, reminiscent, in the Quiet Revolution narrative, of the defensiveness and impotence of the Duplessis era, the film's preoccupation with self is based on a fragmentation and disintegration of that self, a provisionality born out of an encounter with difference. The 'selfishness' of Claude is constantly undermined, his 'self' cannot be taken entirely seriously, form and content combining here in the ludic nature of the film. Claude and Johanne circle each other in the photography scene not in some closed repetition but in a relationship of mutual dependency and attraction: they consist of bits, fragments, atoms, rather than complete and finished persons or identities (although Johanne ultimately turns out to be trapped within the desire for wholeness predicated on heterosexual romance). Narcissism is self-consciously an issue in the film, and 'narcissism' itself is an extremely complex phenomenon. There are arguments to be made that it can represent a way of reducing, not affirming, rigidity of self. It looks back to the polymorphous perverse before the entry into Oedipal identifications (Hocquengem). The plenitude of the Lacanian mirror stage is a misrecognition, and can never be attained, so the self desired as object is in a sense other and not the self.[6]

À tout prendre is noteworthy for its preoccupation with death mediated by ultimately French cultural references. Claude's fantasies of being shot need to be placed in the context of the other references to death in the film: the death-like mask Claude and Johanne see in the city streets; his constant references to ageing and lost youth; the fantasy 'suicide' at the end (anticipating Jutra's own death in 1986 when he threw himself into the St. Lawrence having been diagnosed with Alzheimer's); and of course the x-ray sequence which exposes another hidden but insufficient 'truth' of the self while at the same time displaying his future bare skeleton. It is this obsession and perspective which qualify the theme of birth: his drawing of the pregnant Johanne which points to himself as the foetus; and the extraordinary scene when he visits his mother to discuss the possibility of his marriage to Johanne.

Yves Lever has criticized Jutra for an insufficient critique of the bourgeoisie, but



Tania Fédor as Claude's mother.



A preoccupation with death: Jutra stages his own suicide as a gag at the end of *À tout prendre*. This scene hauntingly anticipates the filmmaker's suicide by drowning 23 years later.

this scene subtly combines social, filmic and metaphysical anxieties. Claude approaches his mother's bedroom like a furtive burglar, but also like a devout worshipper. The tempo of the editing slows radically; the house is seemingly empty except for the dogs; the usually cacophonous soundtrack reproduces a ticking clock only; the camera follows Claude, in slow motion, climbing the stairs; his hand, in extreme close-up, is seen to turn the handle of his mother's bedroom. His mother (the splendid Tania Fédor), propped up in her bed and stroking a dog's head, is calm and authoritative; there is no reverse shot, her face and upper body fill the screen. The scene connotes both birth (the mother's body, the womb, attained via a long series of 'passages') and death (the frozen, interminable time of the bourgeoisie). Incidentally, the sceptical mother formulates Claude's dilemma in the very Québécois or French-Canadian terms of that between the "voyageur" [traveller] and the "sédentaire" [home-body].[7]

À tout prendre is thus marked by a certain existential and even Existentialist attitude which juxtaposes the search for meaning in life with the proximity and inevitability of death. This is the implication of the visit to the (rather unusually free-thinking) priest, rather than Claude's unwillingness to break away from past sources of authority in Quebec society. In addition, the debt to the *nouvelle vague*, and the rather Cocteau-ish 'solution' to sexual and metaphysical preoccupations to be found in the aesthetic, make the film a very open and porous example of 'national cinema'. It is certainly much more individualist than *Pour la suite du monde*, but that individualism is very modern, and at the same time not based on a fixed and complete identity. Claude's disarray is bound up with history and society, and is also a source of enjoyment for him and for the audience. It is a film very much of its time, with its portrayal of the decay of older certainties, but it also looks ahead, even far ahead, as it faces the possibility but also questionability of new ones emerging. The tension in the film is between an aspiration to identity and wholeness and a falling away or flight from it. For D.N. Rodowick, in his lucid summary of Deleuze's film writings, this is what characterizes 'becoming other':

"Rather than identity, becoming-other is driven by a tension between power and evasion. Power articulates itself as a socially managed force that limits the body's range of dynamic affects; becoming-other emerges from a countervailing desire to evade those limits, to find lines of flight wherein new potentialities for desire and identity can be expressed. This process is a double movement from both the side of I and the other" (155).

The 'people' in Quebec in 1963 are also in a process of 'becoming'. *À tout prendre* suggests that that process must be one that never stops, that there is no fixity, no 'sameness' which they eventually 'become'.

Founding cinematic fictions such as *À tout prendre* and *Pour la suite du monde* have been seen to inaugurate, not a wholeness, but founding problematics and ambivalences. But in fact any reference back to a founding moment, a golden age, a discovery, victory, or settlement, involves a highly paradoxical relationship between 'then' and 'now', the moment and its reenactment. It can only be a relationship of lack.

Excerpt from Chapter 6 of Bill Marshall's *Quebec National Cinema: "Auteurism after 1970"*

Auteurism, rather like “national cinema,” is a term that must be simultaneously deployed and resisted, because its practices and procedures do precisely the same. Auteur cinema in Quebec can be “popular”, even if we limit the word’s definition for now as attracting a wide audience. As a leading film intellectual in the 1960s, Denys Arcand offered an agenda that prophetically announced the *film à fesses*, beginning with *Valérie* in 1968, which effectively launched popular Quebec cinema:

“From the time filmmakers forget their mom in order to undress serenely their neighbor called Yvette Tremblay or Yolande Beauchemin, in the full light of day and with a well-focused wide-angle on the camera, from that time, we could envisage like Jean Renoir a cinema which is free and at the same time fiercely national. A cinema of joy and conquest.”

When Jutra’s *Mon oncle Antoine* [My Uncle Antoine] was shown on Radio Canada in October 1973, it obtained half the francophone audience. In these circumstances, it is perhaps appropriate to talk of a *cinéma de qualité*, on (again) the French model, where *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des sources* (Berri 1986), with their high production values, were able to articulate the national in distinct ways for home or international audiences, and to be read more as “popular” or more as “art” cinema depending on that audience and the presence or absence of subtitles. The holy grail within the multiplicity of Quebec cinema is an auteur cinema which seeks a wide audience in the nonetheless exiguous home market but which, as a vehicle for cultural prestige, is able to attract investors. For Marcel Jean, that holy grail is represented by *Le Déclin de l’empire américain* [The Decline of the American Empire] (1986), the triumphant Quebec production which in a sense closes our period. On the other hand, that term, *cinéma de qualité*, is a highly contested one, not only because it was the “*tradition de qualité*,” the studio-bound, script-led literary adaptation that was lambasted by Truffaut in 1954, but because that differentiation and articulation of international arthouse standards and national cultural discourses can fail, fall between the stools, and blandly conform to “the international aesthetic” (Jean 94).



The “holy grail” of Quebec cinema is an auteur cinema seeking a wide audience: *Le Déclin de l’empire américain* (Denys Arcand 1986). More recent examples include Arcand’s *Barbarian Invasions*, Jean-Marc Vallée’s *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2006), and Xavier Dolan’s *Mommy* (2014).

As we shall see, Quebec has one trump card: a much more developed and, to an extent at least, culturally esteemed television culture, and much higher television audiences for indigenous fictional product than English Canada. Television has played an important role especially in Quebec popular cinema in terms of performers, but as it has become involved more centrally in the Quebec film industry, it has articulated centripetal “national” concerns against those other centrifugal forces which form the tensions of globalization.

In the relationship between auteurism and the national, it is possible to plot the fate of a director’s *oeuvre* in the vicissitudes of production described above, and also the particular take or takes a director may have or develop on the national-allegorical tension. How, for example, does the debate on identity initiated in À

tout prendre develop in Jutra's later works?



Explorations of adolescence in *Rouli-roulant* (1966).



Explorations of adolescence in *Wow!* (1969).

Materially Jutra's output is marked by the difficulty of production, to the point that he was forced to work in Toronto in the lean late 1970s and early 1980s. But a coherence can be grasped in the explorations of adolescence, and also of the national past, which characterize his most important films. Just as *À tout prendre* articulated the tension between forces of heterogeneity in the construction of identity, in terms of a prolonged adolescence which was in fact a source of creativity, so do Jutra's documentaries *Comment savoir...* [How To Know...] (1966) (on the innovative use of computers in teaching) and *Rouli-roulant* [The Devil's Toy] (1966) on skateboarding, and especially *Wow* (1969). Of his four francophone feature films of the 1970s and 1980s, two place childhood and adolescence at the centre (*Mon oncle Antoine*, with a quasi-autobiographical script by Clément Perron, 1971; and *La Dame en couleurs* [The Dame in Color], with a script by Jutra and Louise Rinfret, 1984), while the adaptation of Anne Hébert's novel *Kamouraska* (1973), co-scripted with Hébert herself, emphasizes the profoundly gendered nature of the relation between the fixed and unfixed identity construction. Moreover, all three films situate their debates across the "before" and "after" of the Quiet Revolution, a narration of national past from the national present which leads to further ambiguities. Only *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire* [For Better or For Worse] (1975) and the anglophone productions *Surfacing* (1980) and *By Design* (1981) are set in the contemporary period, and they set out radically to question normative sexual arrangements.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Mon oncle Antoine (1971): Adolescence at the heart of a coming of age tale set in the town of Black Lake and in the surrounding countryside of the Eastern Townships.

Mon oncle Antoine is set at Christmastime in the 1940s in the small town of Black Lake, in the asbestos mining region of Estrie, between Montreal and the American border. Life there centres on the shop, which doubles as a funeral parlour, run by Cécile (Olivette Thibault) and Antoine (Jean Duceppe), assisted by Fernand (Jutra), their adopted “nephew” Benoît (Jacques Gagnon), and another adolescent in their employ, Carmen (Lyne Champagne). On Christmas Eve, Antoine and Benoît set out on a horsedrawn sledge through the snow to collect the body of the Poulin family’s fifteen-year-old son, but on their return journey the coffin slips off and the drunken Antoine is unable to help Benoît to recover it. Back home, Benoît discovers Fernand in bed with his aunt, but he nonetheless returns with Fernand to the Poulin farm only to discover the family gathered round their son’s open coffin, discovered by his father as he got back from a lumber camp for the holiday.

It is likely that the film’s success as a reliable workhorse on the art-cinema circuit is due to its combination of universal and particular concerns, or to put it another way, its dovetailing of anthropological and social-historical discourses. In other words, the moment of adolescence is poised between, on the one hand, that childhood tension between polymorphousness and oedipal identification, and, on the other, that adult tension between fixity and contradiction. The order of the adult world is thus relativized, its constructions and illusions laid bare. The specificities of *Mon oncle Antoine* lie in the social and historical context of 1940s Quebec, but also in the juxtaposition with death that qualifies and indeed drives this identity quest (as in *À tout prendre*).

The consequences for the semiotics of the film lie in the use of point of view and the foregrounding of performance and an almost slapstick deployment of what we might term structuring discontinuities. It is Benoît who is the principle focalizer in the film, and this role is supplemented by voyeurism (he and the other employee, Maurice, watch the lawyer’s wife Alexandrine [Monique Mercure] undress) and a more studied observation in which he watches the world of adults



A coming of age tale haunted by death.

(beginning with the early botched funeral ceremony) with a reaction shot inviting a decoding of his expression. This structure, of observation, reaction, and (putative) action on the part of Benoît (what Deleuze would call affection-pulsion-action), forms the core of the film, ending, of course, with the freeze-frame on his face looking through the window at the Poulin house. The close-ups of Benoît's face are, however, ambiguously embedded in the film's action, because he participates for better or for worse in a network of looks (his own outward, but also on him from the community and from the spectator) that structure the present and what his own future might be. The only other bearers of the look are Fernand (in the early sequences towards Cécile and Carmen) and the community (towards Alexandrine as she makes her dramatic entrance; and towards Benoît himself: once he is invalidated by the denial of the look, following the snowball attack on the Anglophone boss, and once he is validated by it, as he proudly accompanies Antoine out of town).

This play of looks invites several interpretations: an existentialist one, as Benoît momentarily and comfortingly coincides with a preordained role; a Foucauldian, as his subjectivity and that of the whole community is brought into being by a collective, internalized, panopticism. But the point is that, as an adolescent, Benoît has only a provisional future: the film is the drama of what becoming like the others would entail, as it analyzes the processes which render adult life possible but also so unattractive. Thus the close-ups of Benoît link him rhetorically with both Fernand (as bearers of the looks, and in the second sleigh ride) and Antoine (the cut between them in the first sleigh ride) in a problematic relationship of similarity and difference. He has the potential to become either, or neither.



Benoît's point of view: Final freeze-frame where Benoît gazes through the window of the Poulin farm house.

That adult world observed by Benoît is predicated on performance and seduction played out in the troubling and disrupting context of death. Throughout the film a play is made of veiling and unveiling, and this has both sexual and theatrical connotations. Carmen tries on the bride's veil. The shop's nativity scene is revealed to the waiting public as a curtain is opened (and collapses in mishap). Cécile and Fernand's lovemaking behind a closed door is discovered. The ultimate unveiling, of course, is the lidless coffin of the Poulin teenager. The performativity central to identity and community is unavoidable and can mean different things. Cécile's song reinforces the community through performance but also hints at non-consummation and the unhappiness of her own marriage.

The rituals of Christmas and church are similarly exposed, the former scene re-enacted as the Poulin family gather round not a manger but their son's coffin. Antoine's performance of masculine bravado is revealed under the influence of drink to be a mere show covering up his own fear of death and corpses. The inevitability of performance implies ambivalent, provisional identities that in everyday life are covered up. It is thus difficult to see Benoît's destiny as a linear one leading through revolt to new certainties. Any "certainties" are bound to be similarly provisional and prone to disruption. The figure for this in the early part of the film is the barrel of nails (used by Antoine for the coffins), delivered to the shop but constantly in the way: finally it is Carmen who stumbles over it, cutting short the boys' observation of Alexandrine. Not only does the barrel neatly structure the film, announcing the lost coffin (Madame Poulin also stumbles on her way back home where her son's illness is announced), it also serves to disrupt the continuous and coherent space constructed by the film classical *mise en scène*.

However, attempts have been made to appropriate *Mon oncle Antoine* for a grand narrative of the emergence of a more mature and finished Quebec identity than that portrayed in the film. For Weinmann in *Cinéma de l'imaginaire Québécois*, the film's overthrowing of certainties connected to the church, and Antoine's final rejection of his adoptive parents and, by implication, wider authority, make it fit into his notion of the Quebec family romance. (The other "absent" father is Jos Poulin, who abandons his work for the *Anglais'* mine to spend winter in the lumber camps and is thus a twentieth-century equivalent of the *coureur de bois*). Again, however, Weinmann's one-to-one allegories, with Benoît gazing on the possibility of the death of Quebec itself in the shape of a corpse his own age, recreate the authority and authoritativeness which Benoît and the film are supposedly calling into question. For Ian Lockert, the final scene also warns of the death of the nation, but, for him, Benoît is now in a position to act, and this "founding work of Quebec cinema" establishes him as a precursor or the Quiet



Historical and geographical anchorage: an establishing shot of an asbestos mine from the beginning of *Mon oncle Antoine* and an image of the bitter 1949 asbestos strike at Thetford Mines.

It is beyond question that *Mon oncle Antoine* mobilizes collective, national discourses as well as individual and “universal” ones. The very opening scene is quite unusual in Quebec cinema: it portrays a confrontation across the linguistic dividing-line, with Jos Poulin walking out on his Anglophone boss. Moreover, the setting inevitably recalls the key strike at Asbestos in 1949, which became a cause célèbre for modernizing intellectuals against the Duplessis regime and has been inserted into a whole linear and teleological history of Quebec culminating in the Quiet Revolution. However, it is difficult to ascribe to Benoît any of that linearity (despite the snowball incident), since the technocratic discourse is absent from the film, and in any case it could lead to Trudeau’s federalism as much as Lévesque’s nationalism (Trudeau supported the strike and published a book about it in 1956, *La Grève de l’amiante. Une étape de la révolution industrielle au Québec* [The Asbestos Strike. A Step in Quebec’s Industrial Revolution].) As Jocelyn Létourneau has pointed out, this appropriation of the Asbestos Strike is highly discursive (and thus performative) act, as provisional as any of the social half-solutions in the film.

In a sense, Lockerbie is employing the same discursive procedure for *Mon oncle Antoine* as the 1960s technocracy did for the strike, with a little bit of Oedipus added. For he deploys totalizing assumptions about age and gender roles. Fathers have again failed; Jos Poulin is a “révolté impuissant/ impotent rebel.” This neglects the fact that the *coureur de bois* figure offers a potentially different sexual and racial economy from Quebec familial discourse. Similarly, the coupling of Cécile and Fernand could be read as liberating—the older woman gets herself a younger lover—but, for Lockerbie, it represents “the regressive character of a relationship in which the age difference is shocking.” (This reading is influenced by Benoît’s point of view, but is this to do with age gap or the disruption of expected “family” behavior?) More severely still, Weinmann sees Cécile as “guidoune/whore”, in Benoît’s eyes. Similarly, whereas Lockerbie sees Antoine’s fear as “neurotic” but “natural” for an adolescent, it is possible to see here a vindication of the film’s extension of adolescence’s denaturalizing gaze to the whole of this society of appearances.

It is clear that any reading of the film must take place across the caesura of the Quiet Revolution and its aftermath. However, instead of a linear, totalizing reading, that relationship between past and present must partake of the national-allegorical tension. The past is both similar (the origins or previous incarnation of “us,” “our” ancestors) and different (it’s ignorance and poverty, infant mortality), often undecidably so (the status of the Québécois). The result is a transtemporality, a relatedness, a to-ing and fro-ing between temporal periods and cultural/political epochs. We shall discuss this further in relation to Jutra’s next film, *Kamouraska*. Suffice it to say here that *Mon oncle Antoine* challenges both the authority structures of the Duplessis era and a comfortably installed identity of self and nation. It does this not by debunking identity and community but by emphasizing their provisionality and lack of groundedness, their “lies” but also the “truths” they can offer in snatches. There is the pleasure of community in



Jutra's sense of place: the General Store in *À tout prendre*.

the film, notably when the announcement of the wedding is celebrated in the shop, but that, too, is balanced by the bleakness of the marriages represented, its commercial and commodified dimension, and of course, the proximity of death. Similar comments might be made of Benoît's burgeoning sexuality (the emphasis in the film on close-ups of his face ambiguously eroticizes him as much as the women he looks at).

The film thus recalls Renoir in its historical construction of a community, the "illusions", "grand" or not so grand, by which it lives, and the way in which "theatre" is extended to the whole of social relations. Like Renoir, Jutra masterfully conveys a sense of place, whether of the town or the family shop, and choreographs his characters within it. However, more bleakly than in Renoir, the relation between inside and outside is marked not by depth of field emphasizing the interconnectedness of social and spatial relations (as in the shots through the windows in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* [The Crime of Monsieur Lange] (1936), or the beckoning landscapes in the final part of *La Grande Illusion* [Great Illusion] 1936), but by the all-pervasiveness of performance in identity construction, the corollary of which is death.

The success of *Mon oncle Antoine* led to the biggest film budget of that time (\$750,000): a literary adaptation, co-produced with France, *Kamouraska* (1973). Anne Hébert's novel, originally published in 1970, recounts the story of Elisabeth d'Aulnières and her marriage in the 1840s to Antoine de Tassy, *seigneur* [Lord] of Kamouraska, who turns out to be drunken, violent, and abusive. She takes a lover, Dr. George Nelson, an Empire loyalist, and together they conspire to kill Antoine. But after the murder Nelson flees to the United States and Elisabeth is put on trial. She is freed, but in effect a new "sentence" begins, with her marriage to the respectable Quebec City bourgeois, Jérôme Rolland. However, this *fabula* (chronological story) of the novel gives way to the complexities of its narrational arrangements, the *syuzhet*. Indeed, telling and remembering are the fundamental problems of the novel, as the *fabula* is recounted from Elisabeth's position as she sits up awaiting Jérôme's death twenty years after the events, which she recalls in a confused guilt-ridden, and half-drugged state. (The film exists in two versions: a 124-minute theatrically released version from the 1970s; and a 173-minute video re-edited by Jutra for television in 1983.)



Quebec's great national romance? *Kamouraska* (1974).

Clearly, there is much potential for reading the film *Kamouraska* as Quebec's great national romance. But instead of a foundational fiction that legitimates the nation-family, *Kamouraska* portrays the impossibility of romance in the colonized space of French Canada. In the aftermath of the defeat of the Patriotes' Rebellion in 1837-38 [where French Canadian "patriots" rebelled against British colonial power], it depicts a Catholic society that stifles women, a Law that is literally in English (the trial), decadent aristocratic remnants, and an ultimately unreliable lover who possesses the freedom that Elisabeth ("that damned woman") lacks. Such a reading would require a linear, progressive relationship between that past and this present, that of the mature Quebec of the Quiet Revolution and its aftermath.

Kamouraska resembles *Maria Chapdelaine* (Gilles Carle, 1983) in these and other respects such as landscape and the "national," but Hébert and Jutra's project can partly be read as an attempt to problematize some of the linear spatial and temporal readings to which that work has been put. Unlike in *Maria Chapdelaine*, the myths of heterosexual romance and of national survival are to be found wanting, and as in *Les Bons Débarras* [Good Riddance] (Mankiewicz, 1980) the diabolical comes to be the preferred figuring of feminine (dis)empowerment. The fact it is a co-production with France means that none of the characters (in the theatrical version) speaks with a marked Québécois accent, with the possible exception of the one lower-class character, the maid and childhood friend Aurélie (Suzie Baillargeon), so that the audible "inscape" fails to participate in the production of nationhood. The casting of Philippe Léotard as Antoine, while he is arguably too "attractive" for the role, does enable his



Maria Chapdelaine (1963): myths of heterosexual romance and national survival.



Geneviève Bujold, the only Québécois international star of the 1970s in *Kamouraska*.

decadence to be tarred with the feudal remnants of “Frenchness” (although a reading is also possible which sees him as very “Canadien” in his powerlessness: Elisabeth does comment early in the relationship that he is very “unhappy,” and it is clear that his stern mother is the one who fulfils the patriarchal role both before and after his death). Geneviève Bujold as Elisabeth is cast not only for her undoubted talent but also as, at that time, the only Québécois “star” on the international and therefore co-production circuit.

Above all, the problematizing of narration places the novel in traditions of European modernism themselves influenced by cinema (Anne Hébert had been living in Paris since the 1950s, before which she had written scripts for NFB documentaries). In the film, the fragmentation of Elisabeth’s narration and the fragments of her story are translated into an extensive use of flashbacks, especially temporal cutting in the same scene, shorn of a voice-over narration but partaking of what Deleuze via Bergson calls “the memory-image.” However, the tension in the film is between what we might call a will to chronology, in which the memory-image actualizes a former past in a way that can be reinserted into a cause-and-effect narrative, and a time-image in which actual and virtual (“pure memory,” where the past is preserved in itself) are indiscernible. The novel more radically disrupts and even renders impossible the process of re-membering. As Bergson and Deleuze argue, “not being able to remember” is often more significant than remembering, because then the present image “rather enters into relation with genuinely virtual elements, feelings of *déjà vu* or past ‘in general’... dream-images...fantasies or theatre scenes (54-5).

The film uses the techniques of basically 1950s and 1960s art cinema to dislocate the relationship between landscape and inscape, between the workings of individual and collective memory and the physicalities which purport to be continuous and given. For nothing is given in *Kamouraska*, and this is basically because of the relationship between gender and history. As I argue in chapter 8 of *Quebec National Cinema*, Quebec women’s cinema set out to challenge many of the totalizing linearities of Quiet Revolution hegemony, and *Kamouraska* to an extent participates in that early 1970s moment. The fate of a woman is for the first time at the centre of a Jutra film, but this seems strikingly appropriate for the cineaste of provisionality and performance. Elisabeth’s negative view of motherhood, despite her numerous children, means that she rejects the filiation on which the national family, particularly one called into being by the *revanche des berceaux depends*. [translation: revenge of the cradles] [8] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Benoît in *Mon oncle Antoine* and Elisabeth here are made to share the motif of gazing through windows, one to contemplate a problematic future, one a problematic past.

That image connotes not past or future plenitudes but the dichotomous relationship between the spatial and the temporal/subjective which maps the arbitrary gender roles Elisabeth at some points in the film (the hunt scene) challenges. When Elisabeth looks out of the window, in fact she looks in. This means that the spatiality in the film becomes part of an undecidability of identity which is basically temporal, in that it both sets up boundaries and narratives and then problematizes them: Sorel and Kamouraska (Elisabeth in the first, the murder in the second, linked by Elisabeth’s litany of the place names linking them), Canada and the United States, Canada and Europe (the bourgeoisie’s desperate imitation of European culture in this colonized and “primitive” space), and, because of the film’s co-production, a (this time) highly appropriate hovering between Quebec and France. Above all, it is that undecidable relation between the *énonciation* of the moment in time of the narration (the relationship between the film’s “omniscient” narrating camera and the implied spectator) and the *énoncé* of the events being narrated.

What marks out *Kamouraska* as an art movie rather than a “popular” representation of the past is the fact that ambiguity is already self-consciously constructed into the narration. Bhabha, of course, wishes to deconstruct the totalities of “nationness” via an engagement with its literal minorities and the

renegotiation of historical and contemporary narratives. Arguably, this procedure is particularly appropriate for Quebec's specific history as simultaneously colonizing, colonized, and post-colonial, "major" and "minor," for Hébert's investigation of women's historical experience and problems of representation, and for Jutra's sensitivity both to the non-linear provisionality of identity and to the persistence of ideas of "home":

"Minority discourse acknowledges the status of national culture – and the people – as contentious, performative space of perplexity of the living in the midst of the pedagogical representations of the fullness of life. Now there is no reason to believe that such marks of difference... cannot inscribe a "history" of the people or become the gathering points of political solidarity. They will not, however, celebrate the monumentality of historicist memory, the sociological solidity or totality of society, or the homogeneity of cultural experience" (307-8).

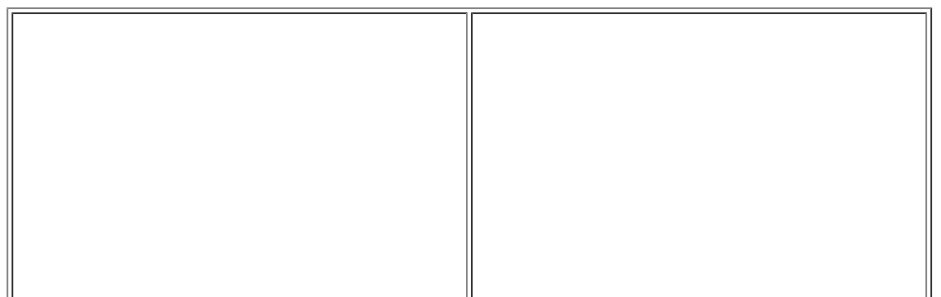
Jutra's articulation of these problems in relation to gender, sexuality, and childhood can be seen in his later films. *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire* (1975), whose mixed critical reception at the time did nothing to help Jutra's career, is daring in both its form and its content. It condenses over a twenty-four-hour period four seasons and seventeen years of married life of an advertising executive, Bernard (Jutra) and his wife Hélène (Monique Miller). Her time is divided between domestic work and visits to a divorced, "liberated" neighbor (Monique Mercure). Bernard leaves for work, is fired for being late, and obsessed with the notion of his wife's infidelity, invites to dinner a man he supposes to be her lover. After that fiasco, the couple confront each other with recriminations and at one point a gun. Their now late-teenage daughter leaves with her boyfriend, never to return. Bernard and Hélène retire to bed, resigned to endure each other.

Jutra's break with the realist tradition of Quebec and Canadian cinema is as decisive here as in *À tout prendre*. In addition, the devastating satire of the institution of marriage, present in his previous two films was still relatively rare in Quebec cultural production. Marriage is seen as particularly damaging to woman's mental health, irrelevant to the child, who develops autonomously from the adults as in other Jutra films, and in general productive of misery all around. Moreover, this social comment is hitched to an innovative temporal structure. Whereas *Kamouraska* was preoccupied with the (doomed) attempt to unify sheets of past time in a coherent, teleological memory-image, the time of *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire* is contracted in a way that renders indiscernible the division between past, present, and future.

Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) had portrayed a decaying marriage through a montage of newsreel-like clips which represented a succession of "former presents" akin to the imperfect tense in French or the habitual past in English. If anything, it is the future, not the past, that gives a perspective to the events in Jutra's film, but that future is one of repetition in the most negative sense, as the outcome will be death ("till death us do part"). It is as if each moment of their relationship contained the past, the present, and the future of Bernard and Hélène. This is another element in the film along, with the mutual torment, which evokes Sartre's play *Huis Clos* [No Exit], set, of course, in a hell, in an afterlife (Bernard: "I see Hell but the Hell you see is better than seeing nothing").[9]



Pour le meilleur et pour le pire (1975): Monique Miller and Jutra co-star in a devastating satire of the institution of marriage.



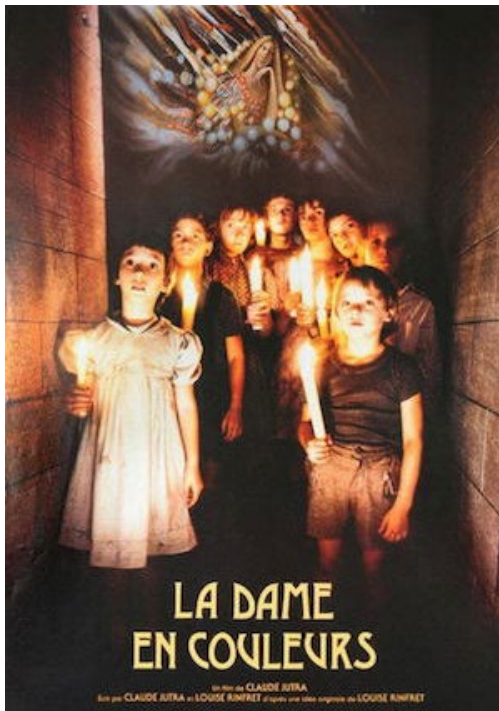


Pour le meilleur ou pour le pire: a re-enactment of the movements, choreography, and sentiments of a stifling married existence.

The one point in the film in which communication, dialogue, and solidarity seem possible is found in those pre-climatic scenes which evoke the shared memory of a film musical. But, whereas in musicals the transition from “normal” action to song and dance signals entry into another world or worlds, and thus liberating movement in which characters are depersonalized and swept into a generalized *mouvement de monde*, in *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire* the couple’s performance is one that re-enacts in a different form the movements, choreography, and sentiments of their stifling existence.[10] (Hélène: “We can’t change what we think but we can change the way of saying it.”) Prompted first by the “happy” memory from early in their marriage of going to see in New York *Rio Rita* (Simon, 1942), a musical starring Kathryn Grayson but also that dysfunctional “couple” Abbott and Costello and with a wartime plot, Bernard and Hélène proceed to recite names of stars, reminisce briefly in English, but then waltz around singing lyrics about mutual detestation and sexual repulsion. This “dancing” ends with Bernard’s “orgasm” as they clutch each other.

Jutra was to continue his interest in sexual politics in the films he made in Toronto: an adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* (1980), and a film about a lesbian couple seeking to have children, *By Design* (1981), which happily denaturalizes received perceptions of masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, and homosexuality.

La Dame en couleurs (1984) is set in the 1950s in a children’s home, doubling as a mental asylum, run by the church. Opening with a new batch of arrivals that reproduces the spectator’s point of view, it evokes the strict regime (“licence to circulate” is needed) and generalized sexual repression. The fourteen-year-old Agnès (Charlotte Laurier, Manon in *Les Bons Débarras*) represents temptation for her tutor, sister Gertrude (Paule Baillargeon), who ends up walking out of the institution and the church. This world is then bypassed by the children as they discover a secret access to the institution’s cellar, where they seek to create an alternative domain with the help of an adult epileptic painter, Barbouilleux (Gilles Renaud, Cuirette in André Brassard’s 1973 *Il était une fois dans l’est* [Once Upon a Time in the East] : the role was to be played by Jutra himself).



La dame en couleurs (1984).

The enterprise fails, brought on by conflicts with Barbouilleux and an escape attempt, abortive for most of the kids. A coda in the “present” has the “adult” Agnès, having refused to join another child in escape, now one of the mental patients. Again, the film could be read in linear fashion to “justify” the Quiet Revolution and demonize the Duplessis era, with consumption (the kids raid the

cellar's provisions, including its narcotics), art and sexuality breaking loose in the alternate subterranean domain. However, just as in *Kamouraska* the feminine position is used to disrupt that linearity and the costume drama to inhabit the split in national subjectivity, so do the kids in *La Dame en couleurs* contradict “national” ideas of maturity and plenitude, and the representation of the past impels a problematic relationship to the present.



Barbouilleux, the visionary epileptic painter: Jutra had co-scripted the role for himself.

Childhood and adolescence are confronted with the grids of authority imposed by the state: in a recollection of the *coureur de bois* [runner of the woods][11] tradition, the kids in the subterranean passageways ask, “Who’ll be the Indian chief?” As we saw in the analysis of some of the *contes pour tous* [stories for everyone][12] films, Western civilization depends on the suppression of the child within. Jutra’s “home” portrays that hierarchy of child and adult in the blurring of the distinction between the two (the kids are “enterprising,” the patients are like children). The subterranean cultural resistance, however, ends in failure, and the contemporary coda, seen by some critics as unnecessarily pessimistic, in fact hurls the critique beyond that of a mere period in Quebec’s history or even a problematization of the similarity/difference of past/present.

The onset of Jutra’s degenerative mental illness, which eventually drove him to suicide, adds an extra dimension to the film. “We don’t think the same way when we’re small as when we’re big,” asserts Barbouilleux in the final confrontation with the children, but “for a grown-up it’s much more difficult.” Partly perhaps because of the film’s uneven plotting, a fruitful alliance is not and cannot be built between the alienated artist and childhood. Is it Jutra himself talking as he tells the kids in the cellar, “There’s no one on my side, neither here or up there”?

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Notes

1. While Marshall mentions a miscarriage, the film explicitly, and scandalously for the time, mentions abortion: Before his disappearance at the end of the film, “Claude” borrows a large sum of money and gives it to Johanne to use for an abortion or for the child’s education. [[Return to page 1](#)]

1a. See Lever, 77. Lever himself shares this assessment of “the complete irrelevance [*décrochage*] to the Quebec collective real”, 78.

2. *The Time-Image*, 250. “Series are the expressions of forces through which the body transforms itself and through which I becomes other ... the series takes up the body in an image where disparate spaces overlap without resolving into a totality or whole” (Rodowick, 168).

3. Arcand, “Cinéma et sexualité.”

4. *Cinéastes du Québec 4: Claude Jutra*, 17.

5. Tom Waugh underlines the fact that *A tout prendre* was made “six years before Stonewall”: “Nègres blancs, tapettes et ‘butch’”.

6. See my discussion of *Les Nuits fauves* in Alderson and Anderson.

7. [In Quebec the term *voyageurs* refers to the legendary French Canadians who transported furs by canoe during the fur trade of the 18th and early 19th centuries. There is a certain romanticism around the legend of the *voyageurs* who adopted a nomadic lifestyle. The tension between the *voyageur* and the *sédentaire* evokes a sharp (and gendered) contrast between the romantic nomadic figures and the sedentary settler population of *Nouvelle France* [New France] (the name given the French colony that would later become the Canadian province of Quebec).]

8. [According to popular lore, the “revenge of the cradles” refers to high birthrates among French Canadians encouraged by the Catholic Church and a francophone elite as a form of resistance to English colonization from the 1870s until 1941.] [[return to page 2](#)]

9. Sartre’s play, however, evokes a situation in which the characters, being dead, are no longer able to make choices, to alter the choices they made, or, because of their interrelations, establish systems of denial.

10. In *The Time-Image*, 60-4, Deleuze, following Alain Masson’s work on the musical (*La Comédie musicale*), analyses the transition from narrative to the spectacular or “implied dream” with the possibility of return, but he also points out that such a transition can call into question the concreteness of the “normal” narrative world, so that we go from the “spectacular” to the “spectacle,” the “dream” element enveloping both or all worlds. This latter view is consistent with the strange temporal and narrative relations of Jutra’s film, but here, of course,

the musical sequence is an extension of the misery containing it, not something giving life back to the everyday.

11. This term evokes independent entrepreneurial French-Canadian woodsman who traveled in New France and the interior of North America, usually to trade European goods with First Nations people in exchange for furs. The *coureur de bois* [runner of the woods] was often a solitary figure, while the legendary *voyageurs* transported furs across great distances as part of the large-scale, licensed and organized fur trade.]

12. A series of 24 films for young people produced by Rock Demers between 1970 and 2014, including the 1984 hit *La guerre des tuques* [The Dog who Stopped the War]. See Marshall's *Quebec National Cinema*, 115-119.

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Jutra filmography and access to his films

Compiled by Julianne Pidduck,
Alexis Poirier-Saumure and Thomas Waugh

The most complete filmography of Jutra's works can be found in a special commemorative issue of the Quebec film magazine *Copie zéro* (issue 33) published in French in 1987 after Jutra's suicide. This entire issue (in French) has been digitized by the Cinémathèque québécoise and can be downloaded from their website: <http://collections.cinematheque.qc.ca/en/publications/copie-zero/no33-claude-jutra/>.

Another very useful resource available mostly but not entirely in French on the website of this organization that holds the rights for *À tout prendre* is a very rich online focus on this 1971 masterpiece: <http://collections.cinematheque.qc.ca/en/dossiers/a-tout-prendre/en-guise-de-presentation/>

In this filmography we include most of Jutra's works, from his early documentaries and collaborative and experimental works to his feature-length productions. The features include both telefilms produced for French (Radio-Canada) and English (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) Canadian public television, plus commercial releases, as well as the many documentaries and shorter dramas.

We also provide information about online access to Jutra's films. Much of Jutra's oeuvre, including his documentaries, can be streamed from the National Film Board French-language and English-language websites:

The French site [<http://www.onf.ca/cineastes/claude-jutra>] offers 14 Jutra-directed items, including *Rouli-roulant* (1966) and *Wow* (1969), as well as two shorts that Jutra participated in collaboratively as part of the legendary *équipe française* [French team] during the pioneering period of direct cinema around 1960.

The English site [<http://www.nfb.ca/directors/claude-jutra>] has only 5 Jutra-directed items, including *The Devil's Toy* (1966), alongside the famous collective *Wrestling* (1961).

Another useful resource is Paule Baillargeon's 2002 wonderful but incomplete feature-length biographical documentary *Claude Jutra - Portrait sur film (Claude Jutra - An Unfinished Story)*. Co-produced by the NFB, this film is not presently streamable, but the Board has announced on its site that it will soon be available to stream online

Oddly, the private sector has come to the rescue: the *Éléphant* Quebec film

preservation project, funded by the notorious strike-breaking media monopoly Québecor, has restored eight Jutra features to its easily accessible iTunes lineup, most with English subtitles. Most pertinent to this special section are *À tout prendre* (1963) and *La Dame en couleurs* (1984). Also available on iTunes are three works of marginal interest for the present post-scandal article: the ambitious 1970s French-language commercial failures *Kamouraska* (1973) and *Pour le Meilleur et pour le pire* (1975), plus the early telefilm *Les Mains Nettes* (1958). The Éléphant model is one that English Canadian film culture, denied access to much of its 1970s-1980s indie cinematic heritage, would do well to emulate! In terms of Jutra's many English-language productions, only the 1981 CBC telefilm *Surfacing*, an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel, is streamable through YouTube. Unfortunately, the 1976 masterpiece *Dreamspeaker*, a CBC production, is currently unavailable.

All of the works that we that have indicated as being available through the Cinémathèque Québécoise are DVD or VHS versions that can be screened on-site at the Cinémathèque on 335, de Maisonneuve Boulevard East, in Montreal.

Filmography

***Le Dément du Lac Jean-Jeunes* (1948)**

39 minutes, 16mm, b&w

Jutra's first feature that he completed at age 18, with his friend and collaborator, the legendary cinematographer Michel Brault on camera

Access: Cinémathèque Québécoise (in French)

***Mouvement perpétuel* (1949)**

15 minutes, 16mm, b&w

This film won the award for best amateur film at the Canadian Film Awards in 1950.

Access: Cinémathèque Québécoise

***Chantons maintenant* (1956)**

29 minutes, 35mm, b&w

Access: https://www.onf.ca/film/chantons_maintenant/ (French only)

***Jeunesses musicales* (1956)**

43 minutes, 35mm, b&w

Access: https://www.onf.ca/film/jeunesses_musicales/ (French only)

***Pierrot des bois* (1956)**

9 minutes, 16mm, b&w

Experimental short directed by and starring Jutra as Pierrot (mime) in collaboration with Michel Brault, with original music by Maurice Blackburn,

Access: Cinémathèque québécoise

***Il était une chaise (A Chairy Tale)* (1957)**

10 minutes, 35mm, b&w

An Oscar-nominated playful, pixillated short co-directed by Jutra and legendary animator Norman McLaren, starring Jutra, with music by Ravi Shankar.

Access: https://www.nfb.ca/film/a_chairy_tale/ (English)

<https://www.onf.ca/film/il-etait-une-chaise/> (French)

***Les Mains nettes (Washed Hands)* (1958)**

73 minutes, 16mm, b&w

Feature-length telefilm directed by Claude Jutra for Canadian French-language public television network Radio-Canada

Access: available on iTunes (in French with English subtitles) [give url]

***Félix Leclerc, troubadour* (1959)**

27 minutes, 35mm, b&w

Portrait of Quebec poet and singer Félix Leclerc

Access: https://www.onf.ca/film/felix_leclerc_troubadour/ (in French only)

***Anna la bonne* (1959)**

9 minutes, 35mm, b&w

Short based on a theatrical poem Jean Cocteau, produced by François Truffaut.

***Fred Barry, comédien* (1959)**

20 minutes, 35mm, b&w

Access: https://www.onf.ca/film/fred_barry_comedien/ (in French only)

***La Lutte (Wrestling)* (1961)**

27 minutes, 16mm, b&w

This short documentary depicts an evening of professional wrestling at the Montreal Forum collaborative project with four cameras by Michel Brault, Marcel Carrière, Claude Fournier, and Claude Jutra. Inspired by Roland Barthes' essay on wrestling in *Mythologies* (1957).

Access: <https://www.onf.ca/film/wrestling/> (English)

https://www.onf.ca/film/la_lutte/ (French)

***Le Niger, jeune république (The Niger Young Republic)* (1961)**

57 minutes, 16mm, colour

A documentary about the newly independent Republic of Niger directed by Jutra in collaboration with Jean Rouch, who is credited with scientific research on the film.

Access: https://www.onf.ca/film/niger_jeune_republique/ (in French only)

***Québec-USA ou l'invasion pacifique* (1962)**

27 minutes, 16mm, b&w

A humorous short documentary directed by Claude Jutra and Michel Brault documenting the many Americans who "invaded" the province of Quebec at the beginning of the 1960s.

Access: https://www.onf.ca/film/quebec_usa_ou_linvasion_pacifique/ (in French only)

***À tout prendre (with English titles *Take it all* or *All Things Considered*)* (1963)**

99 minutes, 16mm, b&w

Feature-length auto-fiction starring Jutra and Johanne Harrelle, based on their previous love affair. See the essays by Tom Waugh and Gregorio Arbolay Jr and the film synopsis in this special section.

Access: <http://collections.cinematheque.qc.ca/dossiers/a-tout-prendre/2-le-film/> (three versions of the film can be streamed from the Cinémathèque website : the original French 16mm version, a 35mm version, and an English version with a Jutra-narrated voice-over and subtitles, translated by Leonard Cohen)

***Petit discours de la méthode* (1963)**

27 minutes, 16mm, b&w

Short documentary co-directed by Pierre Patry and Jutra, this film documents new industrial technologies in France.

Access: https://www.onf.ca/film/petit_discours_de_la_methode/ (in French only)

***Ciné Boum (Ciné Boom)* (1964)**

53 minutes, 16mm, b&w

Television documentary about Quebec film production co-written and co-directed by Jutra and Robert Russel for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)

television).

Comment savoir (Knowing to learn) (1966)

71 minutes, 16mm, b&w

Feature-length documentary about new educational technologies of the 1960s in primary and secondary schools and in universities in the United States and in Quebec.

Access : https://www.onf.ca/film/knowning_to_learn/ (in English)

https://www.onf.ca/film/comment_savoir/ (in French)

Rouli-Roulant (The Devil's Toy) (1966)

15 minutes, 16mm, b&w

A tongue-in-cheek documentary about skateboarders and disapproving police in Montreal.

Access: https://www.onf.ca/film/devils_toy/ (in English)

<https://www.onf.ca/film/rouli-roulant/> (in French)

Au cœur de la ville (1969)

4 minutes, 35mm, colour

Wow (1969)

94 minutes, 16mm, colour

Classic psychedelic feature-length documentary about the fantasies of young people in Quebec at the end of the 1960s.

Access: <https://www.onf.ca/film/wow/> (in French)

Marie-Christine (1970)

10 minutes, 35mm, colour

A short film produced for the private sector about the Montreal underground city featuring Geneviève Bujold.

Access: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pa8kvjWF514> (streaming on YouTube)

Mon oncle Antoine (My Uncle Antoine) (1971)

104 minutes, 35mm, colour

Classic feature-length drama about a boy growing up in a rural town in 1940s Quebec, Jutra's best loved and best known film.

Access: https://www.onf.ca/film/mon_oncle_antoine_en/ (free streaming in English)

https://www.onf.ca/film/mon_oncle_antoine/ (free streaming in French)

Also available on iTunes (in French with English subtitles)

Kamouraska (1973)

Two versions of 124 minutes and 173 minutes for the director's cut.

35mm, colour

Feature-length adaptation of Anne Hébert's novel of the same title with Geneviève Bujold.

Access: available on iTunes (in French with English subtitles) **[give url]**

Pour le meilleur et pour le pire [For better or for worse] (1975)

117 minutes, 35mm, colour

Feature-length drama about heterosexual marriage written and directed by Jutra, starring Monique Miller and Claude Jutra.

Access: available on iTunes (in French with English subtitles). URL not available.

Dreamspeaker (1976)

75 minutes, 16mm, colour

Feature-length drama adapted from a novel by Cam Hubert/Anne Cameron and produced for CBC television about a troubled boy who escapes an institution to

find comfort and understanding with a First Nations elder and his mute adopted son.

Québec fête juin '75 (1976)

65 minutes, 16mm, colour

A tourist documentary co-directed by Jean-Claude Labrecque and Jutra

Arts Cuba (1977)

57 minutes, 16mm, colour

Seer Was Here (1978)

57 minutes, 16mm, colour

The Wordsmith (1979)

72 minutes, 16mm, colour

Surfacing (1980)

88 minutes, 35mm, colour

A feature-length adaptation of the novel by Margaret Atwood.

Access: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8aaB_bftTM (free streaming in English)

By Design (1981)

91 minutes, 35mm, colour

Feature-length film starring Patty Duke about a lesbian couple who set out to conceive a child. Rave by Pauline Kael!

Access: Cinémathèque québécoise (in English)

La Dame en couleurs (The Dame in Colour) (1984)

111 minutes, 35mm, colour

Feature-length film co-written by Jutra and Louise Rinfret about orphans growing up in an asylum.

Access: available on iTunes (in French with English subtitles) **[give url]**

My father my rival (1985)

50 minutes, 16mm, colour



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *The Last American Hero*



The title sequence begins with a rural graveyard. We hear the sound of a muscle car roaring through the hills and the speeding vehicle then appears. Junior is introduced as the driver as he returns home through the Appalachian hill country and the theme song, Jim Croce's "I Got A Name" runs through it. The now-familiar song was first released on the film before the rising singer's death in an accident and the song was subsequently released on record shortly after, becoming Croce's signature song. The lyrics evoke pride in family and identity while "moving on down the highway." It serves as an "internal song": developed within Hollywood film in the 1967-73 era to express a character's inner thoughts without the actor actually singing [Todd Berliner and Philip Furia. "The Sounds of Silence: Songs in Hollywood Films since the 1960s." *Style* 36.1 (2002): 19-35.]. It recurs throughout the film during narrative transitions of Junior's progress.



Returning home, Junior joins his father and younger brother at the moonshine still as they fill plastic jugs with today's output and load up his car to run the illegal output past the local and federal police. The still is a family operation, and Junior's unique talent in fast and evasive driving is established as he foils the police, their roadblocks and pursuit.

Contemporary working class film heroes in *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero*

by [Chuck Kleinhans](#)

Originally published in *Jump Cut*, no. 2, (July-Aug. 1974), pp. 11-14.

Preface: 2017

When I first published this essay in the second issue of JUMP CUT in 1974, it helped mark out the editors' answer to "what is to be done?" in left film studies. First, it directly addressed the representation of the working class and the working class audience for film in the United States at the time. These were the kind of films that other publications and other intellectuals usually ignored, or sometimes recognized only to dismiss. At that point intellectual liberals could, at best, make a "working class hero" out to be someone like the Jack Nicholson character in *Five Easy Pieces* (d. Bob Rafelson, 1970), introduced as an oil field worker who has dropped out of his privileged upper class family and never fulfilled his promise as a child prodigy pianist. That film remains famous for the "chicken salad sandwich" scene where Nicholson's character humiliates a waitress who is required to follow a rule to provide only what is printed on the menu. [Interestingly enough, the location is a Denny's chain restaurant in my now hometown of Eugene, Oregon, right off of I-5.]

Those of us starting up JUMP CUT were critical of Hollywood's production of films that served ideological conformity, but we also recognized that mainstream cinema spoke to the fantasies, desires, and needs of ordinary people. To simply offer a negative critique of the ideological message (the predominant mode of liberal and left film reviewing at the time) could never answer the question of "why are these films so popular?" The stereotypical liberal and left answer was that the mass audience were dupes, easily swayed by bright shiny things, and incapable of reflective thought: end of story.

We had a different approach. In this case, both of these films present the positive American story of the success myth: the Horatio Alger myth that clean living and hard working will eventually be rewarded with economic and status advancement. (The seldom-noticed flaw in the Alger myth is that while the hero is diligent, it turns out that his reward almost always comes by accident, a fortunate coincidence, not through the direct application of his own efforts. It arrives as if by divine intervention, not self-propelled action.) The appeal to white working class men is clear. Given a certain advantage through white skin privilege and male position in the social hierarchy, they expect to succeed, to rise into a higher class strata and advance economically over their own parents. Taking for granted the existing social order, they tend to think that they should, be paid more and have more of shot at success than women, minorities, and immigrants.



However Junior's humiliation of the law officers provokes them to blow up the still and jail the father. Junior brings the lawyer to jail, who explains that bribes will give the father better treatment. Junior needs to find a new way to make money.



Determined to make money for his family, Junior aggressively argues with a track owner (Ned Beatty) to be included in a demolition derby. With his buddies he engineers a car with a secret weapon, a metal ram. He finishes third but then demands a chance to return for the next event, a regular stock car race. His inexperience is balanced against his insistent aggressiveness, and he begins rigorous back roads training in his own fast car.



Junior wins his first race, and 8 more at the small track. Meanwhile senior Johnson is sentenced to a year in jail for bootlegging and tells his son to take care of his mother. Following Southern custom, Junior affirms, "Yes, sir," a mark of family bonds and generational respect. We see the mother (Geraldine Fitzgerald) and his brother (Gary Busey) at another race affirming the role of Junior as breadwinner and new paterfamilias.

But even back in the 1970s, mainstream sociological and economic studies showed that actually most aspirant white working class guys failed. The most common pattern was someone accumulating a small amount of capital, and having acquired some trade or craft skills, starting a small business. A gas station was common for someone with auto mechanic abilities, for example. But this same person was often undercapitalized, didn't have the small business skills, couldn't afford new tools as technologies evolved, and couldn't compete with marketplace changes. Losing it all, the chastened worker returned to his previous level, or even fell below it.

A recent celebrity example is provided by "Joe the Plumber," who in a meeting in the 2008 election campaigns asked candidate Barack Obama about small business tax issues. Joe (Samuel Joseph Wurtzelbacher) claimed he was a plumber and wanted to open his own shop. Obama's response, proposing lower taxes for "middle income" earners but higher rates for successful and somewhat larger small businesses, was taken by conservative media as calling for redistribution of wealth and the Republican ticket, John McCain and Sarah Palin, claimed Obama was a socialist. Joe was incorporated into various Republican campaign events, and frequently mentioned as an ordinary aspiring white working class guy in the Midwest who was dismissed by the African American politician and law professor candidate. On further investigation, it turned out that Wurtzelbacher, had a modest income, was in considerable debt and couldn't possibly come up with the capital to start a small plumbing shop. Even more damning, he was not a certified plumber, and he had never been admitted to even a plumbing apprentice program, and he was not qualified to hold a plumbing license in the state of Ohio. In 2014, after failing in the political realm as a candidate for Congress and as a conservative media pundit, Joe began working at a Chrysler Jeep plant, one that had been rescued by Obama's bailout of the auto industry, and joined the United Auto Workers union.

The narrative of the hero's journey always involves trials, tests, and tribulation. But in these two films the protagonist isn't a person of rank, an established leader, an experienced veteran, an accomplished warrior. Rather the film charts the young man of humble origins and limited means who must face a hard-scrabble road to achievement. Relentless determination, hard work, and a certain cocky self-confidence serve to climb the barriers to success. It's easy to see why these heroes appeal to white working class men: they act rather than react, they are not burdened by doubt or self-reflection, and they make do with what they have at hand. Nothing has been given to them: no prestige, no power, no advantages. They make their own futures (or so it seems to them as long as they imagine themselves without any reference to the structural advantages of their race and gender). And there's nothing in these films to raise those questions. Both films are devoid of anyone except white people. And the women who appear in no way compete with the men, but accept their subordinate social and economic status.

Yet the films are not set in a fantasy world in which all will automatically turn out well. The obstacles are built into the real world and have to do with class. Race car driver Junior Jackson has skills with autos, but no capital. Others, race car owners and race track owners, control the means of production. Junior can only sell his labor power and put forward his special skill set to try to get a better deal. Motorcycle daredevil Evel Knievel learns at his first jump that no one in charge will ever look out for him. Thus his skill at self-promotion and entertainment, first learned on the streets in a mining town, is his bulwark. But that skill also constantly spills over into self-aggrandizement, some paranoia, and dreams of defying gravity and physics, as well as challenging the possibilities of surgical medicine.

Both of these heroes are tied to where they come from: for Junior his immediate family, and for Evel his roughneck mining town buddies, but both of the characters separate themselves from the normative expectations of their place of origin. Junior knows he must leave to become a champion racer, a "star," as he



Though he wins the race, another driver takes issue with Junior's aggressive driving and a fistfight breaks out at the finish line with a general brawl. The track owner writes the check but tells Junior he can't compete there any more, he's a troublemaker and a hillbilly. Defiant, Junior says he's moving on up to Hickory, a major racing track.



After using the rulebook to get a qualification for the regular NASCAR circuit at Hickory, Junior meets up with a driver who complains about his overbearing owner, Burton Colt. Junior's response is to assert his independence: "If you don't like takin' orders, drive for yourself." But the veteran driver says that's a rookie's naïve delusion.



Alone in a new place, on the cusp of a big career change, the night before the race Junior makes a record in a vending booth at a K-Mart. He talks to his family, and this interesting soliloquy reveals his hopes, fears, and anxieties...even to himself. Cleverly, the scene provides access to the character's inner life in a film that otherwise only depicts character by exterior action. The machine delivers the recording and in reflection, Junior throws it in the trash.

describes his future. High school dropout Evel scorns the local sports figures, knowing his destiny will transcend the local horizon. And these are individual paths. Any notion of a collective hero, rising as a group, is absent. You make it on your own. Thus the films' double edge message: the obstacles for working class men are clear and present, but overcoming them is a matter of individual effort.

Contemporary working class film heroes in *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero*

by Chuck Kleinhans

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"There's room at the top they are telling you still
But first you must learn how to smile as you kill
If you want to be like the folks on the hill
A working class hero is something to be."
—John Lennon

Hollywood's typical presentation of the U.S. success myth has centered on the hero's trials and triumph, considering his class origins only to establish the initial "rags" of the "rags to riches" theme. For example, in *The Benny Goodman Story*, Benny, child of the immigrant slums, receives his first musical instrument and training at Chicago's Hull House, but the remainder of the film resolutely ignores matters of class. Aspiring racial and ethnic minority members of the working class have generally had two career paths held out to them in success-myth films: the entertainment business (e.g., *The Jazz Singer* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*) and sports (*The Babe Ruth Story* and *Gentleman Jim*). Such films treat the hero's class and racial/ethnic background perfunctorily, unless the topic is inescapable, as with *Jim Thorpe—All American*, which gives a liberal nod recognizing the racism confronting the Native American athlete, and *Your Cheatin' Heart*, which sentimentally traces Hank Williams' career as a country music singer.

Two recent Hollywood success-myth bio films, *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero*, diverge from the traditional direction by presenting heroes whose working class origins are central to the narrative. Doubtless Hollywood's new cultural pluralism—the shift from conceiving of a homogeneous public to making films for well defined audiences (youths, blacks, etc.)—is an economically motivated adjustment to market realities. Significantly, both real-life subjects of these two films attained, and still retain, their celebrity status among a specific audience—the white working class. Motorcycle daredevil Evel Knievel and champion stock car racer Junior Johnson remain little known in the U.S. middle class. These two films depict working class heroes—working class heroes both in the sense that their class origins are not ignored or hidden, and that they are heroes to the working class. For their intended audience these films are "closer to real life" than films depicting middle class protagonists with middle class problems. Yet both films remain within the limits of bourgeois ideology, particularly in dealing with the success myth, for they affirm that individual success is both possible and worth pursuing.

Their distribution indicates that these films are directed at the white working class audience. *The Last American Hero* was released by Fox initially in the summer of 1973 on the drive-in circuit, which is itself a class-distinguished phenomenon providing relatively inexpensive admissions and back-of-the-car free child care. After remarkable success, *The Last American Hero* finally opened



In the race, owner Colt (Ed Lauter) who controls his drivers by radio during the event, yells at his man who reports the car's engine is running too fast. The boss says to just push it. Returning to the track, Colt's car is totaled in a collision.



During the race Junior's aggressive driving pushes him to the front of the pack, but his lead over the favorite turns into a disaster when he pushes the car past its "red line," and the engine blows up. Afterwards, as Junior prepares to haul his damaged car home, Colt arrives having fired his previous driver: "Junior, you've got the talent, but I've got the bankroll."



At the big race, Marge (Valerie Perrine) is with champion driver Kyle Kingman when his wife shows up unexpectedly. The big hair blonde advises Marge to "sell it or sit on it."



in New York City houses without ever having had a critics' screening. *Evel Knievel* achieved a popular initial success and has been a steady second half of double bills at drive-ins for several years. Additionally, it was chosen as a trump card by a major television network to win the prime time ratings battle in the first week of the 73-74 season because of its appeal to Middle America—the majority of TV viewers.

My discussion of *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero* will describe the films in terms of their presentation of ironic, and sometimes ambiguous, biographies. By specifically looking at several themes in the films—danger and skill, the relation of hero to authority, the role of women, the depiction of class differences, and the action solution to problems—we can better understand the films' appeal.

Success: myth and reality

The media convey information both through form and content. The information conveyed and the way it is presented shape audience sensibility: the question, then, is one of ideology. Modern discussions of ideology begin with Marx's well-known formulation in his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness."

Obviously Marx's point about the relation between social existence and consciousness cannot be taken in a mechanistic way. In contemporary life, mass culture mediates one's consciousness of social reality, and film is such a mediation. The typical success image in cinema is presented in terms of (1) individuals, who (2) succeed or fail by their own individual activity and outlook. Film thus reinforces tendencies favorable to the status quo by implicitly denying even the possibility of group activity for life's goals or measuring success in political terms.

The success myth is so pervasive in U.S. life that it needs little description: The United States is the land of opportunity, males can go from log cabin to White House, Horatio Alger virtues ensure success. The function of the myth in U.S. life is to encourage aspiration and a belief in individual opportunity. Because of its promise of reward for hard labor, it serves to distract the individual from seeing institutional obstacles to striving, and from considering the small number of wealthy and powerful at the top of the success pyramid in comparison with the massive base of "failures." The myth promises to those who lack money, educational advantages, and influence—the vast majority of Americans—that a personality committed to ambition, determination, perseverance, temperance, and hard work will earn its appropriate reward.

The reality of success and failure in the United States, especially for the working class, is quite at variance with the myth. In one of the best studies of the reality and myth of success among industrial workers, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream*, Ely Chinoy points out that external conditions, not subjective factors determine success for the working class. Soon after beginning a career, the blue collar worker finds a ceiling on his or her upward mobility and level of achievement. Subjectively, when members of the working class find their aspirations impossible to achieve yet accept the prevailing ideology of individualism, the result is self-blame and an elaborate defensive rationalization of their position.

Evel Knievel and *The Last American Hero* are particularly interesting in this context because they do not simply present the standard success myth but deal with it in an ambiguous way by qualifying wholehearted admiration for their respective heroes. In short, they are accommodations of the myth to undeniable reality.

Detached from Kingman, Marge invited Junior back to her motel room. After sex she tells the story of how she used to be overweight and was humiliated by frat boys. The pair are both outsiders from humble origins, struggling to get ahead in life.

The harsh reality



of capitalism comes home, literally, when his father returns from serving time for bootlegging whiskey. Jackson Sr. destroys the rebuilt still, and declares his sons have to find other ways to make a living that won't put them in prison. Junior has no option but to go to Colt and accept his terms: "My terms are as follows: You'll drive one race for me, when, where, and how I tell you wearing my uniform, for 30% of the prize money, using my car, my equipment, my crew. Yes or no?"



After winning the big race in Colt's car, Junior bargains a somewhat better deal with Colt, finds Marge is now attached to a rival driver, and goes to the winner's press conference. He enters and flash bulbs go off, as the door closes, leaving just a shadow of the Last American Hero, a media image.

Both *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero* are ironic romances. The traditional romance narrative pattern follows a protagonist through early adventures to a crucial test. The test proves he deserves the title of hero, as with Beowulf, Saint George, and other basic romance protagonists. While both films follow the romance scheme, they also introduce significant irony. Typically a romance clearly distinguishes the hero and heroine, who represent the desirable ideals, from the villains, who embody threats to virtue's triumph. In these films, using an ironic mode, the hero and heroine are tarnished, and they do not simply oppose the villains, but join the villains in a symbiotic, if distasteful union. For these heroes and heroines, the route to success involves compromise. In *The Last American Hero* this issue of compromise forms a central theme. As a beginning driver, Junior (Jeff Bridges) scorns his rivals who are hired by wealthy patrons. But his pride in his self-made status is shattered when he totals his car, the sum of his assets, in a race. Without the cash or credit to buy a new racing machine, he must become an employee in order to drive, and he makes the distasteful decision to work for the owner he most hates, Burton Colt. Colt tightly controls his employees, treating his drivers callously by using a one-way radio to instruct them in precisely what to do during a race. Once Colt's instructions become too obnoxious, Junior's reaction is to tear the radio apart, but this defiance is permitted only because Junior wins the race.

In *Evel Knievel* the theme of compromise is subdued, for Evel (George Hamilton) constantly defies restrictions. Though he is forced to obey his doctor when immobilized by injuries, once patched up, he escapes to the hospital parking lot where he rides a motorcycle while still in several casts, celebrating his bravado until he comically falls off. Constant reference to his dream of jumping his cycle over the Grand Canyon emphasizes his ambition and his wish to defy the laws of the physical universe. For the most part, compromise is treated in terms of Evel's extreme ambivalence. For example, he fears and scorns the crowds as a mass, who will find his potential or actual injury or death amusing. Yet he performs for them and tells them half-mockingly and half-seriously, "It is truly an honor to risk my life for you." He acts similarly with the press and autograph seekers, first verbally rejecting them and then in fact submitting happily to their attentions. In the film this somewhat schizophrenic behavior seems to pass beyond a normal neurosis allowed a professional daredevil. While in some cases his nervousness is mildly comic (Evel's fear that fans will crush him, tear his clothes off, injure him, as they did to Elvis Presley), Evel resolves everything through action and never exhibits fear in his stunts, while paying the price of never finding repose. When his wife suggests a Mexican vacation to find some quiet, he replies that the water makes you sick.

Evel's retort to his wife indicates another ironic romance element. In the typical romance a temporal and/or spatial place outside of the common world—be that a utopian future following the hero's recognition or an Edenic place in the past or encountered along the journey—allows the relaxed practice of life without threats. Both films, however, adopt an ironic stance and say there is no place or time of innocence. Once involved in the quest the hero cannot return to a simpler life nor attain it when he accomplishes his goal. For Junior and Marge in *The Last American Hero* not even a love tryst is safe, for Marge's former lover and Junior's arch-rival as a driver, Kyle Kingman, enters her place with his own key, which he then graciously leaves when he finds the couple in bed. Once he begins professional driving, Junior cannot go back to his former life in the Appalachian hollows. His father returns from a prison sentence for moonshining and emphatically tells his sons that there will be no more stills on his property, thereby ending Junior's other employable skill. Nor can Junior return to his friends once a winner—a point made visually after he wins the big race. At that point as he climbs the stairs leading to the press room for his post-victory press conference, Junior looks down on the small figures of his old buddies in the darkening dusk. He has just told Colt that they will have to be hired as his pit crew, but the difference between Junior, above, and the friends below on the

ground, the growing dark, and the buddies' physical actions, their characteristic "goofing," shows a quantitative and qualitative chasm between the hero and his old companions. As Junior enters the press room he disappears behind the door, but his shadow is silhouetted on the wall in freeze frame. The film ends not with the man, but a two dimensional media image of the winning hero.

Junior cannot go home again, nor can he rest: a season of racing and years of seasons lie ahead. Similarly with Evel Knievel: waiting for his big jump which concludes the film, he paces in a room with wide picture windows looking out on the race track—a constant reminder that there is always a jump coming up, that there is always a quantitative increase in the number of cars he might jump over. In the typical romance the hero's achievement restores order and virtue. In these films achievement—winning the race or jumping over 19 cars—represents the attainment of hero status, but restores nothing. The film hero's accomplishment proves only bravery and prowess and does not bestow autonomous power, great wealth, or physical well-being. This is a reversal of the traditional romance where winning the crucial battle ensures ascension to the throne or chief-advisor status, gifts of wealth, marriage to the heroine, and the establishment of a new social order promising peace, fertility, and plenitude.

In his book *Blue-Collar Life*, sociologist Arthur B. Shostak argues that the appeal of the typical romance pattern presenting a moral man against the forces of the "outside" fits the blue collar male's disposition to posit a general "us/them" dichotomy in life, with "us" usually seen in terms of the extended family, ethnic group, or neighborhood (the three of which may have considerable overlap). For example, the pattern is prevalent in the western with the villain brought into a serene society, or an element that must be expunged, or the variation with the good guy in a corrupt environment. Some recent action films present the same pattern of a moral man hamstrung by institutions, by "them." (For an excellent political analysis of *Dirty Harry* along these lines, see Anthony Chase's "The Strange Romance of Dirty Harry..." in *The Velvet Lighttrap*, Jan. 72; reprinted in *Radical America*, 7:1.)

In the case of *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero*, with their ironic romance pattern, we can see that although ironic, the pattern remains intact and is not inverted by the end. In the balance, both Evel and Junior remain "moral" though not pure in their encounters. The outside, "them," is still suspect: Evel twice states his exaggerated fears that his wife will be "kidnapped, raped, or something" if she goes outside without him, but his obsessive protectiveness is motivated by virtuous concern. Similarly, Junior's first big race on the professional circuit exhibits not only his backwoods ignorance of city ways but also his distance from his fellow drivers who "parade around like movie stars," as he tells his family. In both films the hero faces the problem of maintaining his native qualities and virtues in a quest for success that involves facing the "outside" and its inherent corruption. The resultant ambiguities in the characters' biographies are seen in several themes, such as that of danger.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Danger and skill

Images from *Evel Knievel*



Early morning at the famous Ontario (California) Motor Speedway. Static shots of the edifice with a trumpet fanfare give way to the arrival of a very loud motorcycle detail in flying wedge formation preceding a limousine with US flags flying. An African American driver gets out, opens the passenger door for Evel Knievel. (This uncredited performer is the only person of color in the film.)



Knievel (George Hamilton) comes forward and directly addresses the camera, announcing that "it is truly an honor to risk my life for you."

To find excitement in physical danger is a common enough component of our culture. In *The Last American Hero* and *Evel Knievel* the hero's approach to danger is directly related to his nerve, courage, and above all, to his skill. Working within the narrow tolerances of daredevil motorcycle jumping or high speed stock car racing, Junior and Evel must have skill to avoid injury or death. The two biographical films have little need to belabor the point, for their audiences already know it. For both characters survival is a genuine accomplishment at the end of the jump or race. In *Evel Knievel* the point is made principally through the episode of Knievel's jump in Las Vegas where he crashes on descent, a scene vividly shown in slow motion documentary footage of his body as it agonizingly jolts and twists. In *The Last American Hero* the film presents danger by shots of high speed accidents during various races.

According to both films, adolescence is the crucial time in which to teach oneself the technical skills needed for later survival and success. Junior learns high speed driving by running moonshine whiskey past federal tax agents on back roads at night, and Evel's daredevil motorcycle skills come from his considerable teenage experience escaping traffic cops. At this formative stage of the hero's development the central villains are the police, who are portrayed in both films as stupid buffoons. In *Evel Knievel* an early sequence finds Evel in a Butte, Montana, bar where he has a local reputation for creating excitement. Even as a teenager Evel knows how to build crowd expectation, a skill he later uses to good effect in his daredevil performances. After tantalizing his "audience" he proceeds to break into a hardware store across the street. Finding the money locked in a safe, he has the police notified of a burglary in progress. When the cop arrives, Evel volunteers to go in, if given a gun. He re-enters, shoots open the safe, sends the gullible cop off after the "burglar" and, in a Robin Hood gesture, distributes the cash to his audience. In a similar episode, undaunted when he dynamites a wall inside city hall (the wrong wall—he has opened the men's washroom) and fails to find money, Evel picks up more explosives at a mining company warehouse. He returns to finish the job as the police leave, believing someone tried to suicide in the washroom. Evel then blows open the safe he initially sought.

The first sequence in *The Last American Hero* delivers the same message of police incompetence. Almost trapped by the feds, Junior escapes through a combination of daring and skill by executing a "bootleg turn"—a high speed 180 degree turn on a one lane road. Another time Junior is warned of a roadblock ahead on his police band radio. He sounds a siren and shows a red flasher, which the police take for one of their own. To the embarrassment of the agents, with the roadblock opened, Junior's whiskey-running Mustang roars through. However his glory is short-lived since the feds proceed to find the family still and smash it and jail Junior's father.

Living with danger through skill and "drive" is important for both heroes because the alternative is deadening work. Earning a living in routine ways is portrayed as mechanical and alienating. Evel promises his future wife adventure and travel—both impossible if they stay in their Montana home town. In *The Last American Hero* Junior maintains his father's prime value—independence. During a crucial home scene, Junior and his brother talk. Wayne says that a neighbor is willing to take Junior on as an apprentice garage mechanic at \$2.10 an hour. Junior scorns the idea: apprenticeship is absurd for him, for he has already built his own racer,



In a flashback to his youth, voice over Evel explains he grew up in Butte Montana, a mining town honeycombed with shafts that could collapse. We see a young boy walking in a forlorn area, playing with a yoyo. A car comes up and honks at him to move. The auto then collapses into a hole that opens. The sight gag and the laconic voice over clues the film's ironic stance to the whole story.



Demonstrating his talent for showmanship, in a flashback episode Evel gets a crowd at a bar to buy him drinks while he builds anticipation for "something big" that's going to happen. He leads the crowd to a store closed for the night, breaks in and emerges saying there's a thief inside. A police arrives and Evel offers to re-enter if given a gun. He then proceeds to shoot open the safe and while the cop chases after the imaginary crook, Evel hands out cash to his audience.

and besides, he argues, no garage mechanic will ever have his name in the newspaper except for his obituary.

Following this scene Junior visits his jailed father, who counsels that merely for the money, racing is too dangerous. The son confesses that it is more than that, and paternal wisdom confirms the young man's decision to race.

Father: "Your mother is always after me to get out of the whiskey business. You was too young to remember, but after my first time in the pen, to please her I hired on at the sawmill. (Soundtrack unclear) ... permission to go to the can. Pretty much like here. It didn't seem to worry most of the boys. They put in their time, lookin' ahead to payday, but not me. That paycheck wasn't money, it was a bill of sale. Three months of that ... back to whiskey. It's hard on your ma. But damn foolishness to one person is breath of life to another."

The Last American Hero and *Evel Knievel* depict living with danger through skill as an emblem of independence in a society that demands acquiescence to authority and which offers alienating and deadening work. In terms of the films' audiences this is appealing because it offers a daydream response to the real problem of the nature of work in advanced industrial capitalism. It is neither a realistic nor a desirable solution to problems in the audience's life but a fantasy displacement. Obviously this produces a strong element of ambiguity within the films. They recognize a genuine working class problem, but they postulate only a defensive individual escape, rather than a direct social and political solution.

Authority and the system

The attitude to authority and the social system in both films follows a similar pattern: acknowledging a genuine problem, but proposing an ambiguous solution. In both films the protagonists come to knowledge as they learn how to bargain with and outwit authority figures so as to establish themselves in the best possible position within the system. They learn to what degree authority can be challenged. For *Evel Knievel*, although the police embody authority and their antagonism to him is a long-established fact, they are basically good-natured stupid buffoons, not truly malicious villains. Similarly, in *Evel's* successful "present," his doctor also serves as a buffoon villain. Evel sees the MD's insistence that he rest to repair his broken bones as a conspiracy to keep him from jumping. In *The Last American Hero* we see police idiocy in a farcical episode in which Junior is using a small fuel oil truck to transport whiskey. Pursued by a trooper, he finally has to slow down and he opens a valve that dumps the load onto the highway. The policeman, a visual stereotype of the fat Southern state trooper, demonstrates the alcoholic content of Junior's load by lighting a match to the liquid which stains a mile of highway. Looking back at the burning trail, Junior can smugly point out that the evidence is now destroyed.

More seriously, in *The Last American Hero* Junior learns that he has to fight the system with money when he faces the fact that the criminal justice system is essentially corrupt. After the jailing of his father, Junior brings a lawyer to the jail. Here Junior learns about the justice system when the lawyer explains that the sentence will only be six months if the father is contrite and promises to renounce illegal whiskey making. When the prisoner objects, the following dialogue takes place.

Lawyer: "Elroy, Elroy, now I drink your whiskey....boys in the courthouse drink it. Wouldn't be surprised if His Honor had a jar or two tucked away somewhere, but that has no bearing..."

Father: "The hell it don't! City Hall's so full of crooks they're falling out



Cross cutting between Evel's anxiety before the scheduled big jump at Ontario and his memory of his first professional daredevil jump, Evel recalls how an older veteran bull rider at a rodeo gave him encouragement. But just before Evel's jump the cowboy was killed when thrown by the bull. Evel saw the promoter lie to the crowd about the death.



Continuing to demonstrate his mixed emotions, Evel expresses his pride in his valor and his concern about injury while his wife tends to him. Several visual gags occur here, as he asks his wife (Sue Lyon) for a dressing for a wound on his leg while he waves the dressing around. Though probably no longer workable as a gag, the dressing is visually identical to what at the time (early 1970s) would have been easily recognizable as a conventional menstrual pad which actually has a blood stain on it. His dedicated but cynical surgeon shows up and pours alcohol on the wound to call Evel's bluff bravado about not fearing pain.

of the windows! Country club boys with their payoffs and kickbacks...
Where do you go to find a little justice?"
Lawyer: "Depends on what you can afford."

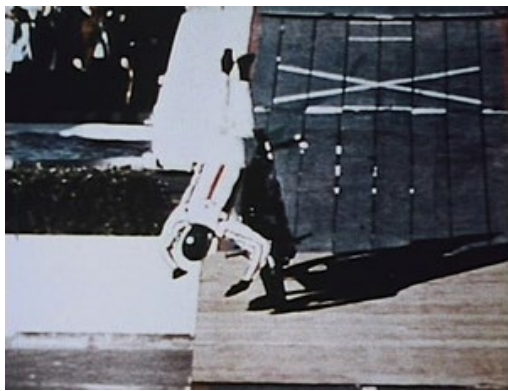
The lawyer explains his fee and "extras" (that is, bribes) which guarantee better prison treatment, and advises Junior, "It's kind of like justice, son. You get what you pay for." The need for ready cash to pay for the "extras" motivates Junior's first attempts at racing.

Junior and Evel both have crucial formative experiences through confrontations with entrepreneurs. In both cases the lesson learned is never accept the boss's terms but bargain for your own. Evel's first jump for pay comes at a small rodeo show run by a red-nosed, bumptious promoter who recounts his distinguished past which includes running the largest reptile garden in the Southwest. Evel's native wit gets him his job—jumping two pickup trucks placed end to end—and he successfully haggles from \$50 if he's successful and \$25 if he's not, to \$50 win or lose. Just before Evel's stunt, the promoter's callousness is revealed when a veteran cowboy who befriended Evel is killed in the Brahma bull riding event. When the promoter covers up the death, Evel completes his jump and leaves in anger, aware that his own potential death or injury would be treated in exactly the same way by the rodeo boss. The rest of the picture implies that Evel operates as a free professional since the financial arrangements and bookings are never mentioned. (Actually, Evel Knievel was sponsored by Harley Davidson, the motorcycle company, and Olympia Beer, and was promoted by a sports PR firm.)

Junior's first encounter with a businessman is similar to Evel's. In the face of Junior's persistence, the owner-operator of a small dirt track relents and allows Junior to enter a demolition derby. After the event, Junior insists on moving up to racing, and is successful through persistence, but finally his independence gets to be too much for the track operator and Junior is barred from further racing there. The young man's response is to move up to the true professional circuit. Here he is aided by Marge, who gives him a rule book which proves his eligibility and a track pass which lets him see the owner of the large track at Hickory, N. C. Again Junior has to talk his way into starting. To this point the young racer is shown as an expert self-promoter. But Junior soon comes into a conflict that his cockiness cannot overcome. Junior instinctively dislikes racing team owner Burton Colt when he sees how Colt constantly harasses his drivers. Forced to drop out of the race because of car trouble, Junior is approached by Colt, who is looking for a new driver. Colt says to Junior, "You got the talent, but I got the bankroll."

Junior scorns the offer, saying he will make it on his talent, but Colt is unruffled, "Dream on, boy, dream on." Junior's dreams are ended when he is finally faced with the economic reality that he can no longer subsidize his racing through whiskey making. He returns to Colt and strikes a bargain, becoming the "hired jockey" he had previously scorned. Junior's talent gives him his only edge, his chance to throw away the one-way radio Colt uses to direct his drivers and to bargain with Colt for a bigger share of the winnings and his own pit crew. The tenuousness of the arrangement, its distastefulness to Junior, and its inevitability is made clear in the film.

In both the cases of Junior and Evel, skill and achievement are portrayed as one's only bargaining tool for more money and better working conditions. For employees it is the only source of leverage and freedom within the situation. Thus



A montage sequence of early home movie films shows Evel's early career in motorcycle races, hill climbing contests, and daredevil stunts. The documents end with slow motion footage from several angles of his famous jump at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas which ended in flying over the cars but a rough landing in which he was tossed end over end suffering many broken bones.



In another flashback Evel's courtship of his future wife continues demonstrating his macho outsider stance. When she says she's leaving town and going to college, high school dropout Evel shoots basketball while asserting that he "don't need no stinking letterman's sweater," to know he's a man, a top notch athlete, etc.

while the system, the police, and entrepreneurs are all pictured as corrupt, foolish, or exploitative, the only way out posited is individual chutzpa and skill.

Role of women

The Last American Hero and *Evel Knievel* both devote considerable time to their heroes' pursuit of their heroines. But the role of women in both is much more than a simple "love interest." Evel's courtship of Linda (Sue Lyon) expresses themes of his general character development: his persistence, aggressiveness, and victory over institutions. The sequences of their courtship are set in the context of school. Evel motorcycles past Linda on her way to school, makes her drop her books and then dares her to ride with him on the cycle, despite her suspicion of him as a "hood." While with her, Evel's show-off ways quickly lead to a police chase. In the next courtship sequence Evel stands outside a high school dance looking in. As a dropout he is excluded, and his cycle, like the cowboy's faithful horse, provides his consolation. Later, as Linda is ice-skating with school girlfriends, Evel arrives. Ever showing off, Evel does some fancy skating turns, and then tricks Linda into his car by giving her the keys (so nothing can happen). He then hotwires the car and drives off with her. The sequence ends with a long shot of the car parked in snowy woods and the implication that they have further physical romance. Later Linda finds Evel in the high school gym, practicing basketball. Evel carries on with his typical bravado—"I don't need a stinkin' letterman sweater to know I'm a hero." Linda informs him, "I'm going to college. I want an education. I don't want to be a waitress at the Mountain Inn and spend the rest of my life here."

Evel's subsequent abduction of Linda from her college residence is visually one of the film's better moments. Denied entrance by the housemother because it is late, he drives his cycle up the long front steps, knocking down the door, and roars up a spiral staircase to Linda's room. The film implies that Evel's successful wresting of Linda from education as an institution and into his vagabond life satisfies her urge not to be a waitress in a small Rocky Mountain town. Yet Linda's only role as Mrs. Knievel is to encourage her husband, to worry about his health and safety, reassure him, and keep his scrapbook up to date. The message, though certainly stereotyped, fits the frequent pattern of working class women moving directly from parental family (extended in this case to college as an in loco parentis institution) to marriage. Linda realistically assesses her future in Butte, and her uncomplaining acceptance of a traditional marital role is clearly shown as her alternative to waitressing or school.

While Linda is defined throughout in terms of her relation to Evel, Marge Denison (Valerie Perrine) in *The Last American Hero* is her own person. When we and Junior first meet her she is considerably more experienced than the young man. Marge functions in the film as Junior's double. She has gone from rural/small town Southern upbringing to urban life. Along the way she has learned that the price of success is compromise, a lesson she tries to tell Junior, who of course must learn it himself. Her initial stance toward Junior is to help him in a rather sisterly way: providing the rule book and track pass to enter big time racing. As secretary to the track manager she also gets Junior a special rate at the drivers' motel and informs him of a free "boo-fay" dinner. Junior reciprocates by inviting Marge, but she has a date, so he sends her flowers. When Marge finds she's been stood up she aggressively seeks out Junior and goes to the buffet with him. There Junior finds Marge is both popular and well-known among the drivers. Since she says she has "tons of work to do" he takes her home early, and later phones her ... but a sleepy Kyle Kingman answers the phone.



Refused entry at his girlfriend's college house, Evel uses his cycle to break down the door, rides up a stair case and gets her to run off with him. The action gag highlights his impulsive swagger and breaking of conventional behavior.



As the big finale approaches, the attempt to jump over 19 cars, at Ontario, Evel stands for the national anthem, surrounded by U.S. flags. The actual jump took place February 28, 1971.



Following the entire film as a build up, the climax arrives when Evel jumps his bike over the row of cars in slow motion shot from many angles, with the crowd's close attention, and celebration when he finishes successfully.

The next sequence with Marge begins with her escorted by Kyle, the race's winner. However Kyle's wife unexpectedly arrives. Sending her husband off to get her a drink ("What good's a husband who can't service his wife?"), she puts Marge down as a racing circuit groupie and gives some gratuitous advice: "Take a tip from me, Sugar: if you can't sell it, sit on it." Junior takes Marge home and in the process of consoling each other's loss, physically and emotionally, Marge relates her past. She was a fat teenager and her mother sent her to business school in Atlanta. There she was once invited to a college fraternity party ("Now nobody on the face of God's green earth thinks he's smarter than those fraternity boys"), which turned out to be a "pig party." Her date received a prize for bringing the second ugliest woman. Marge goes on, "Oh, I cried for a couple of weeks and I got comical calls in the middle of the night—there's a lot of jokers in Atlanta—and I left about a month later." Junior's response is to affirm that Marge is the most beautiful woman he's ever known. But the relationship, though sealed physically, remains undefined. When Junior wins his first big race, Marge is off with another racer, explaining that she has many friends and Junior still is one of them.

Marge has found the independence within her situation that Junior seeks too. He attains it through his exceptional driving skill, while she uses her secretarial skills at the tracks on the seasonal circuit and her sexual and personal attractiveness. And from her actions it is clear that the future relation of the two must be on terms of equality. Both Junior and Marge have made the best of the situation in which they find themselves.

The portraits of these two women have a certain general class accuracy. For neither woman is the emotional quality of the relationship the primary factor in their actions. This attitude, formed both from working class realities and the socialization of adolescent women, differs markedly from the general attitude of middle class women, who place emotional quality first in priorities. (See Mirra Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage*, and Lee Rainwater, et. al., *Workingman's Wife*, which are virtually the only two lengthy studies of working class women's attitudes.)

Class portrayal

Neither Evel Knievel nor Junior move distinctly into the middle class, except as measured by income. Junior maintains his Appalachian roots and is distinguished from other drivers by his more conservative dress and demeanor. Before the big race which concludes the film, Junior joins in a pre-race prayer while other drivers are seen ignoring the spiritual message booming over the track p.a. system. Junior's authenticity is virtually swallowed up in the racing world, just as during the national anthem the U.S. flag is almost squeezed out by product flags for Champion spark plugs, Coke, etc. Although the final shots of the film indicate that Junior cannot go back home, the film also indicates approvingly that he will not join the fast-living crowd of the other drivers. In *Evel Knievel* the hero who attained his position by scorning the institutions of law and education is glorified as the man who will never rest on his past achievements or play it safe, but who will always continue his allegiance to his inner code of daring and his respect for "his" audiences, who are clearly Middle Americans.



After again spinning his yarn about his dream to jump the Grand Canyon, the camera shifts to a presumably subjective shot with Evel's POV as he rides to the Canyon rim, and the film continues with a flythrough shot over the vast space. Credit roll.

Both pictures, however, distort their real life subjects in significant ways. *The Last American Hero* is loosely based on Tom Wolfe's essay of the same name, reprinted in Wolfe's *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. The journalist describes Junior Johnson as a hero to the Southern white working class. But Wolfe adds some background which the film's scriptwriters have discarded. Junior Johnson grossed \$100, 000 in the 1963 racing season and is the owner of his own chicken farm (42,000 birds) and a road grading enterprise in his home county, and Junior had actually served time in a Federal prison for his whiskey activities. More significantly, Wolfe puts Junior in a more distinct class position by describing the moonshining of whiskey as having an economic basis that goes back to the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion of western Pennsylvania farmers against the encroachment of federal authority representing urban and eastern seaboard interests. Wolfe also clearly outlines the domination of racing by Detroit automakers; the Burton Colts do not even exist in the real world of stock car racing. Wolfe puts Junior's reputation into a distinct class and regional framework: Junior, man and myth, is rooted in the values of the rural Southern white working class. In the film, in contrast to the essay, Junior's appeal is more generalized.

While the real Junior Johnson is actually more generalized as Junior Jackson (film name), the screen Evel Knievel is narrower than the image of the public performer. The live Evel in the mid 1970s was given to moralistic platitudes which match his patriotic suit and cycle. His official publicity described him as a high school sports star, a family man (children are not mentioned in the film), a rugged individual, and downplays his early scrapes with the police. In public Evel sometimes scorned the film (though a 16mm print was usually shown at the motor sports shows where he performed). And the picture is not entirely complimentary: it indicates he is abnormally neurotic, an egomaniac at least, fearful of his audience, and his personal integrity is challenged—none of which, presumably, the real Evel would appreciate being said. In his subsequent career Evel became a popular icon, even gaining a contract for toys bearing his name and likeness, until he physically assaulted a fellow in public using a baseball bat. (Details of his early career and subsequent fall are found on his Wikipedia entry.)

Whatever the truth about the real figures, within both films the two antagonists are portrayed as heroic representatives of their class. Junior's personal integrity is unchallenged and in Evel Knievel the point is made following Evel's spectacularly photographed four-and-one-half minute slow motion jump over 19 cars. In a shot from a plane forward and above we see him riding in open Western country and hear a voice over monologue. Though phrased with some of the consistent self-mocking we have seen throughout, by camera attention on Evel and its placement at the end of the film, this monologue has to be seen as a significant statement of the film's theme.

"....Celebrities like myself, Elvis, Frank Sinatra, John Wayne... we have a responsibility. There are many good people who look at our lives and it gives theirs some meaning. They come out from their jobs—most of which are meaningless to them—and they watch me jump 20 cars and maybe get splattered. It means something to them. They jump right alongside of me. They take the handlebars in their hands and for one split second they're all daredevils. I am the last gladiator in the new Rome. I go into the arena and compete against destruction and I win. And next week I go out there and I do it again. And this time, civilization being what it is and all, we have very little choice about our life. The only thing really left us is a choice about our death. And mine will be... glorious!"

(Visual: cut to camera over handlebars looking down the road. Cut: camera moving down road, then out over the Grand Canyon. Freeze with credit roll.)



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The action theme

As in any success story film, both movies picture the obstacles in the way of success. What is particularly interesting in both *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero* is not the use of barriers to retard the dramatic action but the consistent depiction of direct action as the solution to all problems facing the hero. Evel and Junior constantly maintain their desire to win and express that desire in direct, immediate action. Thus any problem Evel faces—whether he is being chased for a traffic violation or wants to be alone with Linda or must overcome his ambivalence and touchiness about risking his life—he solves through action: he attempts to outrun the police, hotwires the car, makes his jump. In *The Last American Hero* the same pattern is re-enforced by shock cuts which answer the problem posed in the preceding sequence. Will Junior get to drive in the demolition derby? There is a shock cut to a sledge hammer going through a car windshield—yes, he is preparing a car for the event.

Basically the action theme in both films posits the impossible. The underlying assumption is that the hero's impulse is right, that introspection is bad and action is good. However, the depiction of the hero's unhampered drive to the top is at distinct variance with the audience's reality. In fact, simply acting, playing out the "little-engine-that-could" theory of advancement, without considering the factors external to one's will is not a sufficient guide to individual advancement.

The depiction of the action theme and its appeal to a working class audience must be seen in light of its middle class inverse. To grossly generalize, we can distinguish two stages of bourgeois ideology dealing with success:

- The naive success myth in which adherence to certain code virtues such as postponement of gratification, respect for authority, hard work, ambition, etc., is shown to lead invariably to success (money, power, esteem, etc.).
- The sophisticated or ironic success myth in which the price of material success is shown to be spiritual and social emptiness. We could call this the bourgeois failure myth, or the sour-grapes version of the naive success myth.

The second stage or version is actually dominant at present, and while the ironic version of the success myth was historically the intelligentsia's defense of their marginal position under capitalism, it has been generalized into a tool of ideological repression of the lower middle class and working class. Its dominance in modern U.S. thought is precisely why *Citizen Kane* and *Death of a Salesman* are so quintessentially "American."

This sour-grapes version is basically unsatisfactory for its audience because it can only be pessimistic. Disagreement with this version of the myth is a component of the common person's complaint of too much sex and violence on the screen; an earlier version of this expression of disagreement was the frequent complaint that "serious" films were not "uplifting"—i.e., optimistic about humans. Part of the appeal of *The Last American Hero* and *Evel Knievel* lies in the fact that they do indeed react against the failure myth. However, being made within the Hollywood system, they rest on a basic lie—that success is possible for the working class through internal virtue pursued by an individual route. These two films reject the excessive attention to the consequences of action found in the failure myth—an

attention that leads to despair, cynicism, and inaction. In contrast to the anguished modern anti-hero, these films propose, through their primary focus on means rather than consequences, heroes who represent a healthy reaction against the interior self examination proposed by bourgeois ideology. They indicate that the hero's problems are not basically subjective and psychological and they reject circular examination of self. The portrait of Marge, for example, makes a distinct break with the tradition that women must examine and question their motives and the future consequences of their actions, or that they must pay if they resolve their problems through action not preceded by agonizing reflection.

These two films can be seen as more "sophisticated" than one might initially expect. Evel is compulsive in creating his own myth from everything at hand, in proclaiming himself a hero while covering the traces of his self-promotion. This gives the picture a certain ironic tone in which one is never quite sure of what is being presented. Is it a straight story, or a straight story overlaid with the director's eye exposing Evel's own comic and amusing neurosis? Actually it is even more complicated: a straight story that includes Evel's self-parody as he promotes himself to hero status for his own gain. The film says that if you have to hustle for a living you might as well be egomaniacal and megalomaniacal about it. One could never, within the context of the film, begrudge Evel his attitude and actions. Thus Evel's self-inflated comparisons of himself with Elvis Presley and John Wayne are not merely laughable, but wry.

At this point in considering these films we can see that they are appealing to a working class audience in their rejection of the failure myth. But at the same time, in the terms of that rejection, by adhering to the idea that success is possible within the present system and that success is individual, the films remain within the prescribed limits of bourgeois ideology. If one pursues the success myth and then fails, one can only blame oneself. As Chinoy comments:

"To the extent that workers focus blame for their failure to rise above the level of wage labor upon themselves rather than upon the institutions that govern the pursuit of wealth or upon the persons who control those institutions, U.S. society escapes the consequences of its own contradictions."

In order to get a better perspective on the relation of the success/ failure myth to film, a further consideration of the Hollywood film audience is in order.

Hollywood's audiences and critics

While auteur criticism provided a valuable corrective to the previously dominant snobbish dismissal of Hollywood film, auteurism, has promoted a confused view of the Hollywood audience. A ready example of this is provided by an excerpt from a self-promotional statement by a new film journal:

"*The Journal of Popular Film* does not ignore the unalterable fact that the box-office, the U.S. public, has determined the developmental thrust of its films."

The motivation behind a journal of popular film is a healthy reaction against the elitist high-culture notion that the mass audience has an inherent mediocrity (at best) in its taste and intellectual capacity, and that a film's popularity proves its aesthetic inferiority. Yet the defense of popular culture, as presented above, repeats a basic high-culture assumption: that consumers determine the products and services they consume. (Or, as the highbrow critic puts it: the lowbrow public gets the crap it deserves.) Of course the idea of consumer determination is widely promoted by merchants of all types of goods and services: celebrating a democracy of taste ("consumers are free to choose"), they justify a low level product. The only conclusion that can be drawn from following this deteriorated line of reasoning is that the majority of people are childish in their selection of art

and entertainment.

It is curious that film criticism persists in following such a weak line of thought in the face of the widely-publicized “consumer revolt” of the last few years. At the same time that it has become household wisdom that U.S. consumers do not have safe and environmentally adequate (much less reliable and economical) automobiles, nutritious food, safe and inexpensive pharmaceuticals, etc., film criticism has taken little notice of the reason for poor quality consumer goods and services—the capitalist system—nor has it applied a critique based on this understanding to its own object of study: the consumption of film entertainment.

The unexamined “unalterable fact” that “the U.S. public has determined the developmental thrust of its films” turns out to be, on modest consideration not a fact at all but an opinionated wish and a false one. Run-of-the-mill mainstream U.S. sociology has long ago documented the commonsense observation that choice in consumption is determined principally by the external condition of availability and secondarily by the subjective condition of sensibility, which rests on the cultural atmosphere and training before the age of consent. (For a concise essay on the subject, see C. Wright Mills’ “The Cultural Apparatus” in his *Power, Politics and People*.) Any statement about U.S. film audiences which assumes a free market economy and consumer free will and free choice as false as a lemonade stand analogy to explain contemporary capitalism.

Another frequently unexamined idea about the film-audience relationship is that movies mirror their audience. This is often qualified by the notice that the image is distorted. However films are not distorting mirrors, for a distorting mirror exaggerates a whole. Rather they are selective mirrors which do not usually serve as overt indoctrination (as in jingoistic war films). Films also state covertly through selection. Thus we must ask of any film not merely what is presented but also what is left out, particularly in key areas such as class, race, and sex. We can say, shifting to Bazin’s metaphor, that films are a window on the world, only if we also say that the film almost always opens on a vista that is dominated by upper middle class white heterosexual males who accept the prevailing orthodoxies even when the film is about how miserable they are in such a situation.

While investigating a working class community, Herbert J. Gans found that its members tend to select what is self-confirming or culturally self-validating when given images in the mass media (reported in Gans, *The Urban Villagers*). In the context of my argument, it would seem that the working class attitude to the hero is a combination of romantic acceptance and a pre-set cynicism that discounts exaggeration. From this point of view, the ironic stance inherent in *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero* would not interrupt audience response but actually mesh with it. Junior and Evel are accepted as heroes, but since their portrayal is qualified through irony, the audience can accept this too, as an internal debunking of sorts. In a parallel case, Shostak argues that the popularity of expose journalism among the working class (e.g., the old *Confidential* and the current *National Enquirer*) can be attributed to in part to a desire to put celebrities in their place. The typical newspaper sports page exhibits this tendency, for over a period of time it both builds the heroism of an athlete and exposes his Achilles heel of hot temper, egotism, excessive partying in season, etc.. Precisely because of their directors’ ironic stance to their heroes, neither *Evel Knievel* (dir. Marvin Chomsky) nor *The Last American Hero* (dir. Lamont Johnson) can be interrogated for clear answers to the social problems they raise.

Just as the working class film audience selects what is self-validating the media, so too does the middle class. A striking example is provided by Robert Warshow’s classic essay, “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” which describes the comforting nature of the failure myth as presented in the gangster film. On a close reading, Warshow’s analysis far better describes the appeal of the gangster film to the liberal middle class intellectual (the essay was first published in the *Partisan Review*) than to anyone else.

Within the Hollywood film about the only healthy look at the success and failure dynamic in a social perspective including class terms is found in Preston Sturges' comedies, perhaps because Sturges himself had so thoroughly internalized the contradictions of success and failure. What is most revealing about Hollywood success/failure films is what they do not show. First, they ignore the absence of opportunity and its root source in the very nature of capitalist social organization. Even in those rare cases when a film does depict absence of opportunity, as in *The Roaring Twenties* where returning veterans from WWI face unemployment and therefore turn to crime, the remainder of the film's message is Warshaw's "comforting failure."

The second omission is the feasibility of group action and the possibility of defining success as not merely rising above one's fellows but rising with them. The closest Hollywood generally comes to any depiction of group achievement is always with an in extremis situation: the stranded platoon, the sinking ship, the lifeboat, etc. (Such films usually present some variant of the theory of "natural selection" since most of the group dies by the end.) Interestingly enough, such films are also generally the only ones which explicitly deal with class differences as a theme. The exception that proves the rule are the Hollywood films of European directors such as Lang, Renoir, and Lubitsch.

In this context, *The Last American Hero* offers an interesting comparison with the "quintessentially and self-consciously Hawksian" (Sarris) *Red Line—7000* which treats auto racing with a studied indifference to the drivers' class backgrounds. When we talk about the film audience we always mean an aggregate of various audiences which can be described by distinguishing their nationality, language, sex, class, race, religion, age, occupation, political views, etc. In other words, there is never a homogeneous audience for a Hollywood film. To say this is not to argue for a nominalism claiming every individual's response is totally unique. Obviously some degree of generalization is necessary for critical thought. Recognizing many "audiences" lets us avoid the error of overgeneralization in using such terms as "the American film-viewing public" or the "universal appeal of director X" or "America's sex symbol" without further specification. To generalize the audience actually reveals the most chauvinistic ethnocentricity — elevating the reviewer's/critic's own sex, class, race, and other attributes to the level of the universal.

The challenge of changing the cinema demands a deep probing of several areas by film students and film makers. A radical cinema must consider exactly who the audience is for a film and face up to variety within that audience. It must also consider the audience's tendency both to accept and reject parts of the film on the basis of what it finds self-validating. That means that new ways of overcoming such acceptance and rejection must be found to deliver a radical message. Finally, film alone does not change consciousness. We must directly link the struggle to change consciousness with the struggle to change the external conditions of the audience's life.

Afterthoughts: 2017

With the passage of time, in returning to the films and the essay decades later, I was struck by several things. One was the absence of African Americans or other people of color from the films: something that would be unlikely to happen in Hollywood films made today because of changes in casting politics and marketing strategies. Minimally, we'd now be likely to get a token representation at least. Another was that in retrospect both heroes' lives were vastly simplified for these plots: amply demonstrated on their Wikipedia entries.

The real Evel Knievel actually was a very inventive hustler and athlete, with children, at the time of the big climactic jump shown in the film. He dropped out of high school to work in the mines, was a regional champion ski jumper, served in the U.S. Army, started a semi-pro ice hockey team, ran a hunting guide service

(based in poaching on government land in Yellowstone National Park), sold insurance, and ran a Honda motorcycle dealership. All before his daredevil stunt career took off. His career derailed badly several years after the film came out. He'd attained considerable celebrity and had a lucrative deal with Ideal Toys using his image. But he also acquired a rumored reputation for hard drinking, gambling, extramarital sex, and explosive violence. This came to a head when he went after a critic by hitting him with a baseball bat in a public space with many witnesses.

We now know that the script for *Evel Knievel* was actually written from scratch by screenwriter/director John Milius (there's a great article on him in JUMP CUT 57).

"Milius says Knievel 'saw himself as the new gladiator of the new Rome, something larger than a daredevil. He saw the whole spectacle of civilization and the absurdity of what it's turned into, and he fit into that'."

George Hamilton, both producer and star, reported:

"Milius made me read the script to Evel. I realized he was kind of a sociopath and was totally messed. Then all of sudden Evel started to adopt lines out of the movie for himself. So his persona in the movie became more of his persona in real life. He would have been every kid's hero on one hand, but then he went and took that baseball bat and broke that guy's legs and that finished his career in the toy business. Evel was very, very difficult and he was jealous of anybody that was gonna play him." (Wiki)

In a similar simplification vein, the real Junior Johnson's career flourished in the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s with one year out when he was jailed for running an illegal whiskey still. Updating the depicted racing to c. 1970 obviously saved money since recent races could be cut into the staged action. He was the first to exploit "slipstreaming" in auto racing: getting an advantage by holding close behind a faster car until the last laps. Johnson did go on to be a racing team owner and headed several business enterprises, including fried pork rind snacks.

But beyond these curious facts, this essay has some current resonance due to the sudden flurry of attention to the white working class in the US. Following Donald Trump's surprising success as a politician, writers, thinkers, and politicians reconsidered "fly over country." What used to be called Middle America now seemed to be a player again in politics. So now we see on the liberal side antagonistic debates about future Democratic Party politics, and on the right a surge in alt-right public events, especially for populism, thinly veiled white supremacy, and anti-immigration nationalism.

At least everyone on the progressive side now seems to admit that the working class in general has been ignored, although the response remains for now a mishmash of concerns: the opioid epidemic, rural poverty, the decline of manufacturing and family wage union jobs, the loss of stature, regionalism, resentment by those who feel deserted, left behind, dismissed, and ignored. But this last point, resentment, is significantly, manipulated by Trump and others and focused especially on race, to mobilize whites to reverse what was advanced in the Obama era, and on a particular partial analysis of class. Rather than simply stated economic inequality, the Right has often successfully framed it as embodied in "the Washington swamp," and "Wall Street"—both easily linked to the Clintons and the Bushs, as well as moderate establishment Republicans. With a slight of hand, Trump, Tillerson, Mnuchin and company display as somehow not part of the 1%.

What is new is the large scale open expression of grievance by whites, especially referencing the white male working class. It also has to be admitted that for all the

concern with social justice issues and identity politics, the otherwise sophisticated use of “intersectionality”—the explicit founding of analysis in gender, racial/ethnic/national identity, and class—has often failed to thoroughly and rigorously consider class. The national sea change brings class back to being a central issue.

In terms of media, art, and cultural analysis, it’s still worthwhile to ask the basic questions I was concerned with here. Given that popular culture at a minimum appeals to ordinary folks, how do we understand that in terms of commercial mass media? What is the appeal? And understanding that, how can radical media makers use that in their own creative work?

A second point worth new consideration: the success story remains a fundamental narrative trajectory in U.S. popular story telling. As such it deserves ongoing scrutiny. Hollywood has often found success with underdog stories. Sometimes groups of strivers (*Breaking Away*, *Dallas Buyers Club*), often comic lovable losers (*Animal House*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Ghostbusters 1 and 2*). Positive uplift biopics celebrate heroes: *42*, *Race*, *Sully*, *Milk*. And there’s always the underdog fictional hero: perhaps most famously *Rocky*, but in the same pattern *Die Hard* and dozens of other “against all odds” efforts. One interesting turn that could use more analysis: the relatively new extended documentary genre of celebrity musicians such as *Michael Jackson, Journey from Motown to Off the Wall* and *What Happened, Miss Simone?* as well as in-depth looks at backup musicians such as *The Wrecking Crew* and *20 Feet from Stardom*.

But the inherent nature of defining success in a capitalist economy and culture in terms of individualism and monetary wealth makes the ironic version of the success myth the most durable narrative, almost obsessively returned to, stirring the ashes, looking for answers in the bones. That can be harsh (such as Oliver Stone’s *Nixon*), or mild (*The Founder*, with Michael Keaton’s cheery version of Ray Kroc’s building the McDonald’s empire). But it can be endlessly twisted, as with as with the serial changes of *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, or *Mad Men*, or *Breaking Bad* or the dark visions of (comic) *The Wolf of Wall Street* or (serious) *There Will Be Blood*. Our current moment, the Trump Era, has already produced many new versions of the archetypes of ironic success. If we survive, there will be lots of tales to tell. In the meantime, we can use our own twists our own ingenuity and political smarts to get the truth out in the open.



Men's pornography: gay vs. straight

by [Tom Waugh](#)

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2018

Editor's note on "Men's pornography: gay vs. straight"

We're delighted to reprint Tom Waugh's classic essay, originally published in *Jump Cut*, no. 30 in 1985, with its original illustrations. We included the text version when we put our back issues online in the late 1990s, but adding the illustrations was too complicated at that moment. Tom, in his own charming way, didn't let us forget about this lapse. And for many years we all got a lot of mileage out of detailing the controversy the images created among our staff and our compromised and reversed solutions. Though to be fair to *Jump Cut*, Tom saw the original piece reprinted three more times without any of the images, and without the important section discussing Curt McDowell's *Loads*.

More recently, Tom wrote a typically witty and shrewd retrospective piece on the history of his essay and its fortunes: "Men's Pornography, Gay vs. Straight": a personal revisit." This appeared [Porn Studies](#), 4:2. 131-138. 2017. In contradiction to its name, *Porn Studies* is oblivious about the nature of visual culture research; *Porn Studies* (and all Taylor and Francis/Routledge publications) never presents any naughty images ("Ahem, we're English, you know....") [Warning: the journal has an incredibly high paywall, as usual, from Taylor & Francis: US\$ 2014.00 for 30 days for the issue; US\$ 42.00 for the article for 24 hours access].

Well, Canadian Tom and Yankee *Jump Cut* don't have such neuroses. Here, we're reproducing the original article, with its original images, and (ta-dah!) new images to do justice to *Loads*. And for a bonus, here's a portrait of devilish Tom back in 1985 when the piece was first published.

by Chuck Kleinhans for the editors.



photo credit: Chuck Kleinhans

Introduction: labels and red herrings



Starting July 2,
San Francisco
Premier of
SLEAZE
 The movie
 your mother
 wouldn't
 take you to
 plus
KID
FROM
L.A.

We do more than just show movies
 PLAYROOM . . . SLINGS . . . BUNKBEDS

Screening Room Theatre
 A PRIVATE MEMBERSHIP CLUB
 220 Jones Street 873-3384
 Open Daily 10 a.m.
 LATE SHOWS FRIDAY AND SATURDAY

BOB'S BAZAAR JULY 1, 1982 PAGE 32

Gay porn theaters "do more than just show movies."

Taking part in a debate about pornography, I am painfully aware of contradictions involved in my position as a person to whom a great many compromising labels may be applied (in alphabetical order: academic, anti-patriarchal Canadian, cinephile, contributor-to-a-magazine-on-trial-for-obscurity, cyclist, gay, male, socialist, teacher, thirty-five, unattached, vanilla-sexual, wasp, etc.).

I belong to a cultural and political context — the urban gay male community/ies — in which dirty pictures have a hard-won centrality, both historically and at present. I am also an individual consumer: I couldn't begin to describe the importance in my own political/personal growth of the erotic components in the work of Baldwin, G  net, Pasolini, Warhol/Morrissey, Burroughs, Michelangelo, and even Gore Vidal (to begin as usual with the most respectable list), not to mention *Tomorrow's Man* (the crypto-gay physique magazine I discovered on the sports rack of the local newsstand as a trembling teenager in Presbyterian Ontario in the mid-sixties), and *Straight to Hell* (the underground folk-raunch magazine

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FINAL**

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MUSTANG catalogue of short non-theatrical films, c. late 70s, gives short plot summaries and a small photo for several dozen films.

of readers narratives I discovered as a trembling grad student in New York City in the early seventies, when I was wondering whether marching in Gay Pride could blow my comprehensives).

How then am I to express my solidarity in words and actions with women's rightful denunciation of pornography as an instrument of antifeminist backlash, of the usurpation by industrial capitalism of the private sexual sphere, of the merchandizing and degradation of women's bodies, of the incitement of rape and violence against women? Can I do so without aping the standard liberal male guilt-trip or its "we're oppressed and alienated too" refrain? without echoing the occasional anti-feminist tirades in the gay press by beleaguered men who think they see women lining up alongside the cops? Can I do so while insisting that sexual liberation is still an essential component of political liberation and that erotica has a rightful, even indispensable, place in the culture and politics of sexual liberation — gay, lesbian, feminist, and yes, straight-male?

Is it enough for me to repeat that anti-woman pornography, a symptom, can only be eradicated by a fundamental transformation of society along feminist-socialist lines? And that, in the meantime, if I had time, I could support various proposed liberal stopgap measures by the bourgeois state towards curbing pornography's worst social effects. These would include, that is, *measures short of obscenity provisions in criminal codes* such as: the use of labor and criminal codes to halt child exploitation, forced labor, non-consensual sexual relations, and the incitement of violence. I'd support the regulation of an above-ground sex industry by means of unionization, taxation, labor codes, public visibility restrictions. In short, I'd support the kind of state intervention that regulates tobacco and alcohol (even though this kind of regulation has led in France to a kind of de facto suppression of gay culture). I also obviously support non-state strategies of consumer resistance like boycotts and education, such as those led around "non-pornographic" films as CRUISING, WINDOWS, and DRESSED TO KILL in which I have participated.

Censorship is both a red herring and a real issue, and often a means of halting debate (one Montreal writer demands that readers take a stand either for or against porn before establishing terms or definitions; a Toronto writer demands that readers choose between life and art). For me, a gay man struggling against continuing, in fact escalated, censorship of gay newspapers and films, and, in the Canadian context, resisting the most ferocious police suppression of our culture in any Western society, censorship is a real issue. Even though many of the most visible anti-porn activists have repeatedly renounced legal sanctions against pornography and some have stressed the necessity of gay-lesbian rights education as part of the anti-porn discourse, many mainstream spokespeople are not so careful. As just one example, in 1978, the year that *The Body Politic*, the Canadian national gay-lesbian paper, began its still ongoing struggle to survive in the obscenity courts, Canadian feminist spokespeople testified before a parliamentary committee and saw their proposals for revision of obscenity statutes (to provide for violence) manipulated and appropriated by homophobic liberals and the New Right alike. The coincidence may or may not be only symbolic, but we don't have time to wonder.

In 1980, the National Organization of Women in the U.S. resolved that pornography is not a genuine lesbian-gay rights issue, nor are pedophilia, sadomasochism, and public sexuality (all of which overlap with the issue of pornography). All four of these issues have been central concerns within the gay male community/ies since Stonewall, and favorite pretexts for our persecution. But some feminists, straight and lesbian alike, have tended to regard them as areas where we are struggling merely to exercise our full patriarchal privileges as men (a view that has sometimes been partly justified). Within the last few years,

the lesbian-feminist community has learned not only that it will not be able to resolve these issues away but also that they are of utmost pertinence to feminism and lesbian liberation, and furthermore, that (who ever would have thought?) the interests of gay men and feminists on these issues are not necessarily irreconcilable. The so-called choice between censorship and pornography, art and life, is falsely formulated. Women's right to defend themselves against patriarchal violence and the right of women and sexual minorities to full cultural, sexual, and political expression, are allied rights, both threatened in the current conjuncture. To prioritize or rank them on our agenda greatly damages the anti-patriarchal movement (just as reproductive rights must not have less priority on the agenda than lesbian rights or vice versa).

The recent debate on sexuality within the feminist community, in the headlines of the alternative media since the *Heresies* sex issue, has already had some input from the gay men's movement. In all modesty, anti-patriarchal gay men still have an important contribution to make. It may be no accident that some of the first utterances of the new feminist sexual outlaws appeared in gay newspapers (with varying degrees of lesbian input, from a little (*The Advocate*), to some (*The Body Politic*), to tons (*Gay Community News*). Gay men were struck from the beginning by how much the new discourse of women's pleasure echoed but went further than the discourse of early gay liberation (in the era when gay groups used to call themselves the Gay Liberation Front instead of the National Task Force), profiting directly from two decades of feminist debate. Of course the anti-porn right saw our satisfaction as patronizing and the use of our media as conspiratorial:

"The lesbian S & M [sic] movement is a growing and organized one, especially in San Francisco. One of the leaders, Pat Califia, who has a slave, wrote the article, 'The New Puritans,' which was published in the paper *The Advocate*. One of her arguments is that she doesn't want anyone taking her fist fucking magazines away from her. I think it is very interesting to note that most articles on this appear in primarily gay male publications. It seems to make a lot of sense since gay men tend to like porn, have a stake in it, and reinforce these attitudes to their advantage. This is again our colonization, women being taken over by gay men instead of straight men." [1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Regardless of the obvious rejoinder that we are too busy molesting children to have time to be taking over women, I would like to explore in this article our stake in porn, to sketch some of the contours of our contribution to the debate on sexuality and porn. Specifically, I would like to situate gay male pornography in relation to straight male pornography in terms of its uniquely contradictory mixture of progressive and reactionary characteristics in its relations of production, exhibition, consumption, and representation. Far from wishing to offer an apologetics for gay porn against homophobic dismissals from within the women's movements, both from the NOW center and the WAP right (I realize that my refutation of such dismissals are open to being misread as defensiveness, an unnecessary attitude I may not be wholly successful in avoiding), I feel that an objective analysis of gay pornography will clarify and expand many of the terms of the current debate.

The following "topographical" chart is largely contemporary in its focus, that is, post-sixties, though reference is made to the historical evolution of gay pornography particularly since the establishment of embryonic modern-day gay ghettos following World War II (I also refer here and there to classical stag movies). My main object is a relatively loose comparison of gale male pornography to straight male pornography, referring wherever relevant to its major product divisions: theatrical films, hardcore and softcore; rental or mail-

order video; arcade/adult-bookstore materials, mostly film loops and hardcore magazines; mail-order films and photographic sets (beefcake); glossy mass-distribution *Playboy*-imitation magazines like *Blueboy*; and finally, porn that may be called "artisanal," amateur or folk, both written and visual, e.g. *Straight to Hell*. (Obviously these categories sometimes overlap, as with video versions of theatrical films, and some exclusions are arbitrary — live performances, written materials except for the artisanal STH, and ancillary branches of the industry like gadgets).

The comparison is organized in terms of relations of production (making), exhibition (showing), consumption (looking), and representation (depicting). Obviously, this chart, with its illustrations and appendages, is a work-in-progress, and I welcome any corrections or additions. It may reflect also a certain unavoidable bias and a greater expertise in the gay male column which readers are asked to tolerate. On the sidelines, I also offer a brief reflection trying to connect the feminist conception of patriarchal public space to the gay ghetto and its pornographic cultural forms. And lastly, since we have often heard the question as to what a nonsexist pornography of the utopian future might look like, I conclude with an examination of Curt McDowell's *LOADS*, a non-commercial gay pornographic film from San Francisco (recently seized in Montreal incidentally) with the idea of wondering in concrete terms how far or how near we might be to that ideal

A note on definitions

Much of the debate has been a war of definitions, of distinctions between sexist pornography and nonsexist erotica, between my art and your smut, and so on. All such definitions tend to be, for reasons of semantics, ideological rather than scientific. This is true whether explicitly so (as in any definition based on values, inherent artistic merit, or political or educational effectivity), or by implication, that is, expressed as formal/aesthetic, legalistic, physiological (Auden defined pornographic as anything that gave him an erection), historical, sociological or commercial (the definitions of pornographers themselves). I am not the first to insist that any advance in the debate must acknowledge all of the definitions currently in play since these definitions themselves are weapons in the ongoing struggle.

I will not add to the confusion by proposing a new definition (except insofar as the above caveat and a refusal to distinguish between erotica and pornography constitute a definition), since for gay people the definition imposed by police, censors and courts at any given point will always be the determining one.

However, since discussion of pornography is becoming increasingly acrimonious and difficult, and since misunderstandings are already being translated into social and legal practice, I will make a few prescriptions. Participants in the debate must situate themselves in relation to the definitions struggle and must specify exactly what images or texts they are referring to and exactly what social remedies they are proposing, if any.

This precision is indispensable in avoiding co-optation by the book-banners, the homophobes and the Moral Majority, who have gotten so far by blurred distinctions and misleading generalizations. Next, every exclusively single-issue intervention is a step backwards. Connections must be established at every point between the porn debate and the other issues of the anti-patriarchal struggle, especially reproductive rights, sex education, and lesbian/gay rights. I would go even further to say that every comprehensive intervention on pornography must acknowledge the existence of gay male pornography. To pass over the stacks of *Blueboy* lined up beside *Penthouse* is either homophobic (as in the case of the National Film Board of Canada's *NOT A LOVE STORY*) or misguided liberalism,

misguided even if the evasion arises out of solidarity with gay people. General propositions about pornography that do not apply to gay pornography are inadmissible (for example, does, "All pornography degrades women"[\[2\]](#), apply to gay male pornography? if so, how? if not, why not?). Progressive gay men have nothing to fear from an open and non-homophobic confrontation with gay pornography, nor from our own self-critical confrontation with the abuses of pornography within our community.

Finally, the following distinctions are essential to any meaningful discussion: between pornography and violent pornography, between consent and coercion, between consensual power play (SM) and violence, between images and actions, between individual sexual practices and collective sexual politics. This latter distinction is crucial. The personal may be political, but there is no such thing as a politically correct individual sexuality. By this I mean that we must support the full rights of sexual outlaws to act out their individual (consensual) desires, whether sadomasochists or drag queens or Phyllis Schlafly. Andrea Dworkin's statement that all fucking is inherently sadistic discredits her other work, some of which is useful. Specific sexual practices as depicted in a given image do not necessarily coincide with relations of exploitation or domination, nor with any other power relation. A man or woman portrayed as getting fucked cannot automatically be seen as victim. Gay porn in particular, and of course gay sexuality in general, undermine the widespread assumption in the porn debate that penetration in itself is an act of political oppression. A sexual act or representation acquires ideological tenor only through its personal, social, narrative, iconographic, or larger political context.

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Jewel Theater ad for theatrical gay porn. It features reruns and a well-developed star and auteur recognition system.

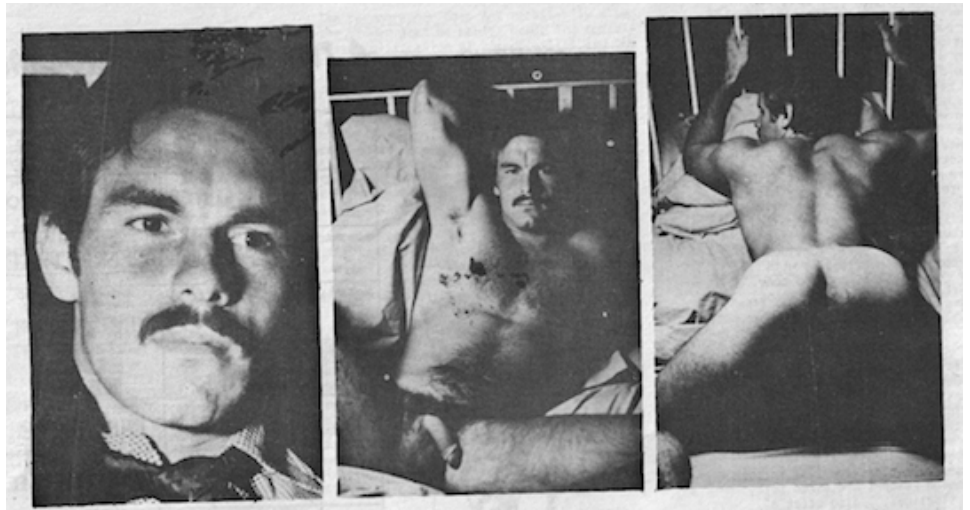
The ghetto: a note on space

One way of looking at the evolution of the gay movement since World War II is as the growth of our claims to space. Our first claim was to the inviolability of our private space. (The state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation, said Trudeau, when he decriminalized consensual sodomy between two adults in 1969 — a reform only a minority of U.S. states have followed.) Our next claim was for the inviolability of the ghetto, our gathering places and neighborhoods. Our final claim was full open access to all public space of our society, and in fact, many of us insisted, to alter the terms of that society. Our claim to our media and to our culture, including our pornography, is part of all three of these claims to space.

When we talk this over with our feminist allies, we often fail to strike a sympathetic chord. The space that we have been demanding is only the space we have been conditioned to expect as men in patriarchal society, space that has been only partly withheld because we suck cock. Women have not yet achieved access to that space, either literally in terms of public territory, or metaphorically in terms of media of cultural, sexual, and political expression. In short, gay pornography profits from and aspires to the institutionalized presence of patriarchal power built on the absence/silence of women, and is thus complicit in the oppression of women.

This is true and it hurts. But it's not all of the truth. Firstly our claims to space, private, ghetto or public, have not been achieved except incompletely and provisionally, always subject to invasion and revocation. Ghettoized spaces, as women have always sensed in their kitchens and church basements and offices, are no substitute for autonomous political space; they are more like enclaves of self-defense and accommodation. Our pornography, in fact, reflects the recognition of this insufficiency. Of the 110 STH anecdotes I mention elsewhere, only eight take place in ghetto space (saunas, discos, backrooms, cinemas), whereas about forty take place in our private homes and the rest all take place in non-ghetto public space. Our greatest visibility may be in the ghetto, but our fantasies and our everyday lives are elsewhere.

Pornography has become one of our privileged cultural forms, the expression of that quality for which we are stigmatized, queer-bashed, fired, evicted, jailed, hospitalized, electroshocked, disinherited, raped in prison, refused at the U.S. border, silenced, and ghettoized-that quality being our sexuality. Our pornography is shaped both by the oppression told by my long chain of participles and by our conditioning as men in patriarchy. We must direct our claim to our pornographic culture, not towards occupying our share of patriarchal space, but towards shattering that space, transforming it.



Images from a *Mandate* glossy photo spread, 1976. These photographs demonstrate how an image's mix of poses, cultural codes, and codes of body type can construct a fantasy based on the flux of roles which are alternatively/ simultaneously/ interchangably active-passive, inserter-insertee, dominant-submissive.

On getting fucked

Richard Dyer's assertion in the accompanying article about the dominance of heterosexist modes of sexuality in gay porn narrative needs some qualification:

"... there seems no evidence that in the predominant form of how we represent our sexuality to ourselves (in gay porn) we in any way break from the norms of male sexuality ... the narrative is never organized around the desire to be fucked, but around the desire to ejaculate (whether or not following on from anal intercourse). Thus although at the level of public representation, gay men may be thought of as deviant and disruptive of masculine norms because we assert the pleasures of being fucked and the eroticism of the anus, in our pornography this takes a back seat."

This may be true of many or even most theatrical films (though I think this requires further research — certainly lots of individual sequences I remember contradict this). However, passive penetration fantasies are extremely common as narrative principles in many non-commercial films and anecdotes I have encountered (as are fellatio fantasies, active or passive, which do not seem to be organized around the narrator's ejaculation). Perhaps the non-commercial or artisanal origin of the examples that come to mind says more about the porn industry than our erotic culture as an audience, but that remains to be seen. What does a passive penetration fantasy or a submissive fantasy look or sound like? This question is not only of academic interest. The active penetration fantasy is such a dominant one in the straight male porn industry and in patriarchal culture in general, that, in looking for alternatives, we should analyze the other side of the coin. I've talked about this with some women who, like many gay men and perhaps straight men, are aware of and often disturbed by fantasies of passive penetration, of submission, even of rape.

I propose this advertisement for a San Francisco gay bar, and this abridged citation from a STH anecdote from *Meat*, both as a footnote to Dyer's generalization, and as evidence for an investigation it may be profitable to pursue:

"Air Force Guy Takes 37 Cocks Up Asshole in One Session"

"A.P.O. San Francisco — I heard about this construction site with a lot of horny studs. I'm 24, 6'1" tall, 165 lbs, white and love to get fucked ... gang fucked. Wore cutoffs and hung around the front gate at closing time. A dude eyed me the once over and invited me in. He was in his late 20s and was pretty rugged looking. Led me to a trailer and ripped my Levis off. My head was immediately kissing a desk top and my bare ass protruding over the desk. Talk about getting fucked rough! Heard the door open and more dudes walked in grabbing for their zippers ... To get guys up for it quicker I started a line in front as well as in back and sucked off dudes. Got cream in my mouth and in my ass. My asshole was raw but well-fucked, and I'd like to go back for more."
(From *Meat*)

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Men's pornography, gay vs. straight: a topographical comparison

Relations of production

Gay male pornography

1. gay male producer employs gay male models
2. small-scale industrial or artisanal production and distribution base for all commercial categories, reputedly some mafia presence in theatrical films
3. producer control, non-union employees paid low flat rate, even for stars; stigma usually prevents career crossover for performers
4. theatrical industry stagnant since mid-seventies with only a few dozen showcases; mail-order business strong; growth only in video area; market seems saturated in present political situation.
5. small capital outlay and modest profits in theatres, with budgets never exceeding \$80,000 for Joe Gages features (L.A. TOOL AND DIE), all in 16mm; according to Gage, theatrical market allows only one or two major films a year; reruns endemic.
6. highly developed star system (Richard Locke, Al Parker), and brand-name auteurs (Toby Ross, Joe Gage), especially in theatrical features; also brand-name mail-order houses (Colt, Falcon).
7. overlapping of-porno constituency with gay community at large, side-by-side existence within the ghetto: Artie Bressan has made political documentary, porn features, and a legit feature; porn ads appear alongside feminist women's ads in Gay Community News; "danglie"* mogul Pat Rocco sang in the Metropolitan Community Church choir; theatrical star Richard Locke currently campaigning for AIDS research.
*danglie: a short-lived porno genre of the late sixties, after court decisions allowing nudity but before the hardcore explosion: hyperkinetic but flaccid nude males facing camera and doing a lot of jumping up and down.
8. flourishing presence of non-industrial erotica (i.e. amateur, folk, artisanal), e.g. readers narratives in Straight to Hell,

Straight male pornography

1. straight male producer employs female models
2. large-scale industrial apparatus for production and distribution with lots of small-scale competition; pervasive presence of mafia and other multi?
3. producer control, mostly non-union employees with low flat-rate; some performers in "legit" areas receive high rewards and occasional career crossover, e.g. Sylvia Kristel, Pets of the Year, etc.
4. still apparently a growth industry with 1000's of theatrical outlets and video boom, expansion continues into "legit" films (LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER), and spin-off industries.
5. huge capital outlays relatively common, especially in pseudo-legit area, e.g. CALIGULA, where films can cross over out of the combat-zone market; huge profits.
6. wide range of star and auteur recognition in legit softcore films and in "prestige" hardcore features
7. no straight equivalent; straight porn has no self-defined constituency or community base other than the straight male gender caste, extending across class, race and zoning divisions.
8. straight equivalent is marginal or industry adjunct, e.g. "PlayboyForum," advice columns, Hustler photos of readers'

classified ads culture, home movies, amateur beefcake, extension of pre-ghetto underground culture.

9. artistic avant-garde: historically an important role as producer of gay erotica in preliberation era (police harassed Kenneth Anger and beefcake studios equally); currently a much diminished but still visible role, e.g. Curt McDowell; Barbara Hammer as source of lesbian erotica.

partners, swingers' newsletters, cable TV.

9. artistic avant-garde: less important historical role (e.g. GEOGRAPHY OF THE BODY, Brakhage's late-fifties fuck films); current role negligible, though Michael Snow has been censored in Toronto.

Relations of exhibition

Gay male pornography

1. commoditization of private/individual sexual space (bedside stroke mags, home video); telephone sex services a recent extension.
2. theatrical, arcade and bookstore space as social terrain, meeting place and setting for sex
3. exhibition space as liberated zone, extension of the gay ghetto, as gay refuge from heterosexist territory; favored space for anonymous contacts and for individuals who are dysfunctional in bars and saunas
4. huge mail-order and rental video market is much more important than theatrical market; important glossy magazine industry. Strongest market away from gay ghettos.
5. in isolated areas, straight theatres and adult bookstores service gay community; in New York and elsewhere, cheap straight theatres service poor and minority gays.
6. porno theatres restricted to ghettos and combat-zones; glossies are mass distributed but far less accessible than Penthouse.

Straight male pornography

1. commoditization of private/individual sexual space, straight equivalent even more pervasive, e.g. pay TV, cable.
2. no equivalent: theatrical exhibition space is zone of terror for unaccompanied female potential partners, except for sex industry workers
3. no real equivalent in contemporary context: combat zone is extension of straight male domain. Remote equivalent to gay situation might be seen in straight males escape from family, respectability, and suburbia. Some women have argued for similar function for women: Lisa Orlando (pornography as first glimpse of freedom, aid in adolescent search for validation and pleasure and sexual autonomy); Ellen Willis (porn as protest against the repression of non-marital, non-procreative sex, resistance to a culture that would allow women no sexual pleasure at all); Deirdre English (porn district as small zone of sexual freedom).[3] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)
4. straight equivalent to mail-order market has all but disappeared except for specialty areas, e.g. fetish, SM; glossies are huge multi-national industry; video is eclipsing theatrical exhibition.
5. no equivalent
6. pervasiveness and respectability of straight male theatres; shopping center and neighborhood outlets in addition to combat zones; glossies omnipresent, iconography having long since seeped into popular culture and advertising.



Left, an example of mail-order beefcake available from Bruce of Los Angeles in the early 1960s. Note how the romanticization is undercut by a phallic joke. Center, mail-order beefcake still by Bruce of Los Angeles, c. late 60s. Does this indicate self-oppression through the eroticization of straightness? Right, racism in a specialized genre of beefcake. Theatrical films seldom have racial articulations of this order.

Relations of consumption

Gay male pornography

1. privatized, individual masturbation aid, in all categories, including theatrical and arcade.
2. accessory to sexual relations between strangers and between familiars; theatres and arcades are lively meeting and sex places, saunas often have film or video rooms
3. the spectators' positions in relation to the representations are open and in flux. These include: non-viewing with the images functioning as background visual muzak; direct unmediated look at image-object, especially in solo-jerk films; look mediated by narrative — spectator's position fluctuates or is simultaneously multiple, among different characters and types, roles, etc. Spectator's identificatory entry into the narrative is not predetermined by gender divisions; mise-en-scene does not privilege individual roles, top or bottom, inserter or insertee, in any systematic way.

Straight male pornography

1. privatized, individual masturbation aid, as above
2. only rarely a similar phenomenon (motel movies?); probable use as accessory to prostitution?
3. spectator's position tends to be rigidly gender-determined; in all categories, straight male spectator looks at female image-object, without mediation of straight male narrative surrogates (Penthouse centerfolds) or with (narrative features). Mise-en-scene privileges women's roles and visibility, i.e. as insertee, whether active/top or passive/bottom. This is why close-up fellatio scenes (cock as prop) are far more common than male-female cunnilingus (a gynophobic taboo-also operates here). Male figure has far less visual weight even in films headlining male stars such as Harry Reems. In hardcore, the privileging of women's roles is more emphatic than in classy/crossover softcore (e.g. PRIVATE LESSONS, LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER) because of strong narrative lines and appeal to women spectators (still such privileged male personae tend not to

4. gay male spectator habitually invited to identify narratively with victimization and/or penetration of the Self, i.e. of gay male, often by straight male. Eroticization of victimization or submission is most common in noncommercial porn, e.g. of 110 randomly chosen Straight to Hell anecdotes, 30 eroticized active role on the part of the narrator, 33 were submissive or victimized, 43 were both or interchangeable.

5. gay porn functions as progressive, educative or ideological (consciousness-raising) force, as challenge to self-oppression, the closet and isolation (Oklahoma is reputedly the strongest mail-order market); gay porn often serves as isolated teenager's first link to community.

6. gay porn functions as potential regressive force, valorizing sexism, looks-ism, size-ism, racism, ageism and so on, as well as violent behaviors; reinforces the closet by providing anonymous, impersonal outlets? legitimizes straight-identified self-oppression (of 110 STH anecdotes, 43 valorized straight-defined men as erotic object)?

have cocks). (For further research: am I wrong in assuming that straight men's fantasies never flirt with forbidden corners of the text? Do they never project on/identify with the female roles? I'm afraid to ask any.)

4. straight male spectator habitually invited to identify narratively with victimizer, to eroticize victimization of the Other (woman-object), only rarely of the Self, as in the specialty dominatrix subgenre (ILSA, TIGRESS OF SIBERIA). (Distinction must be made between passive fantasy where narrative subject is in control (almost all fellatio scenes in het porn) and submissive fantasy where narrative object is controlled or victimized, extremely rare in mainstream het porn).

5. no strict equivalent; historically stag movies had a loosely parallel function in sex-repressive society, as instruction and initiation for the dominant gender/sexual-orientation caste; in traditional Japanese society, pillowbooks had an important and respectable educative function.

6. straight porn can/does legitimize phallogentric, gynephobic, alienated, and violent attitudes and behavior; the "throwaway" woman.

Relations of representation: depicted sexual practices

Gay male pornography

1. gay men fuck and suck and are fucked and sucked, etc., in a wide range of combinations and roles not determined by gender; sometimes roles are defined by sexual practice, body type, age, class, race, or by the enunciation of sexual orientation (office employee short of cash for date with girl friend fucks gay boss for money), but just as often this is not so.

2. no equivalent to straight convention of lesbian sex, except perhaps relations among men narratively defined as "straight"

3. in longer films, overall structure is as often purely episodic as climactic, e.g. J. Brian's FIRST TIME AROUND is a narrative daisy chain (A fucks with B fucks with C fucks with D fucks with A).

4. within individual sequences, usually a climactic escalation of sexual practices, i.e. fucking after sucking, with staggered ejaculations of all participants as a drawn-out climax; rigid convention of external ejaculations of all participants as a drawn-out climax; rigid convention of external ejaculation often followed by ingestion of semen. Same for loops and short films.

Straight male pornography

1. straight man (two or more men are less common because of rigid taboo on intermale sexuality) fucks and is sucked by one or more women in a more limited gender-defined range of roles and combinations, e.g. women frequently are active partners (i.e. aggressive fellators) as well as passive insertees, but the range of roles is quite rigidly prescribed. Would non-sexist hetero porn for men or women have the role-flexibility of much of gay porn?

2. relations between women a routine formula, usually as prelude to entry of phallus

3. features tend more often to be linear or climactic in narrative structure.

4. roughly the same climactic escalation of sexual practices as above, more compressed because of scarcity of ejaculators (the gay taboo), and limited positions; straight men come outside too. Same for loops and shorts.

5. taboos: on male-female sex (Joe Gage's use of het coupling to establish straightness of a character is exception that proves the rule); on effeminacy, age, obesity, and drag (except in specialty materials or nonsexual roles, e.g. a drag queen in Wakefield Poole's BIJOU leads butch construction worker down into labyrinthine sexual underworld).

6. in loops or short films, narrative is often solo performance, masturbation or just posing which can be either or both active (tense, upright) and/or passive (supine, exposed, languid, available). Same conventions in glossy centerfolds or photo-spreads. Solo performance materials establish eye contact with spectator.

7. sexual practices stigmatized and often technically illegal are standard routine component in all categories: porn shows what legit media deny, suppress and stigmatize.

8. violence and rape, consensual and non-consensual, among gay men or perpetrated by characters defined as straight, is not uncommon.

5. taboos: on intermale sex; also on age, obesity, deviation from 'perceived ideals of femininity and beauty, etc.

6. same solo-stroke or posing conventions as above, except that poses are exclusively passive (supine, spread, seated, squatted, orifices offered, etc.). Same eye-contact conventions.

7. illegal and stigmatized practices (other than violence) only in fringe subgenres such as kiddie-porn or scat, etc.; het porn shows what legit media imply, simulate, or present "tastefully."

8. violence and rape is common, consensual and non-consensual, perpetrated on women by straight men, rarely vice versa except in dominatrix subgenre; in some respectable cryptoporn, violence is perpetrated by gay man or transsexual/transvestite, e.g. LOOKING FOR MR. GOODBAR, DRESSED TO KILL.

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Topographical comparison, continued

Relations of representation: common narrative formulae

Gay male pornography

1. five common elements: (Kathleen Barry's list quoted from Kronhausen can be applied):[4] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]
 - seduction (often of straight man)
 - profanation (*Straight to Hell* is full of clerical motifs, but in post-clerical society the more common rendition is simple anti-authority — e.g., coach rims star athlete, sailor fucks officer)
 - incest (*Straight to Hell* is full of father and older brother fantasies; less omnipresent in commercial porn but still very common)
 - permissive-seductive parent (one film, title forgotten, depicts furtive father coming out at same time as teenage sons).
 - defloration (in gay porn one version of this is initiation, another is the converse of the term — being deflowered).
2. element unique to gay porn is "coming-out," gay male assumption of gay identity and sexual practice; shedding of straight male identity or conversion of straight male can be part of this (Joe Gages KANSAS CITY TRUCKING COMPANY).
3. intra-narrative voyeur or photographer is common
4. doctor or sex researcher as narrative mediator
5. straight-identified institutional setting, e.g. ranch, hospital, school, military, construction site (of 110 STH anecdotes, 30 are situated in this way); military settings especially common.
6. sex-for-pay, especially straight hustlers and rough trade
7. subversive humor (penile salute from Marine's uniform in Jean-Claude von Itälie's AMERICAN CREAM).

Straight male pornography

1. these 5 elements are still basic to much straight male narrative porn, though capitalist competition has tended to expand the repertory. Profanation is less important, nuns having all but disappeared. Insatiable nymphomaniac seems to be a new formula, whether comic (DEEP THROAT) or moralistic (DEVIL AND MISS JONES).
2. remote equivalent without the distinct ideological tenor might be woman's realization of her true desire (EMMANUELLE, DEEP THROAT) or young male protagonist's assumption of his patriarchal sexual prerogatives (mostly in softcore such as PRIVATE LESSONS, PORKY'S or SPRING BREAK). Conversion formulae also present: lesbian is often converted by a good fuck; in ROOMMATES, gay man is similarly converted.
3. same reliance on intra-narrative voyeur or photographer as above.
4. same formula of doctor or sex researcher as narrative mediator.
5. straight male interest in all-women institutions such as convents and brothels is related but has different ideological tenor and is now less common.
6. shares gay interest in sex-for-pay same, especially brothels, though now less common than in classical stag films; recent twist is suburban housewife who has sex to pay bills.
7. humor not so evident, either prurient (guttural clitoris is DEEP THROAT) or flat (GONE WITH THE WIND-style

- | | |
|--|--|
| | chorus-line rape production number in porno musical BLOND AMBITION) |
| 8. back-to-nature, fucking in the forest or posing in the desert. | 8. common in softcore (EMMANUELLE, LADY CHATTERLEY), less so in hardcore. Cheesecake, unlike beefcake, is usually interior. |
| 9. documentary gimmick, e.g. Peter de Rome's Super 8 sex on the subway, or location shooting and nonprofessional actors in Toby Ross's BOYS OF THE SLUMS with acne and failed erections. | 9. not common; exceptions include French feature on porn star EXHIBITION, or Vietnam brothel sequence of HEARTS AND MINDS. |
| 10. public sexuality a common element, e.g. glory holes of TAXI ZUM KLO a frequent formula. 24 of 110 STH anecdotes take place in toilets and 38 in other public spaces such as parks, cars, and rest stops. | 10. no straight equivalent since straight public sexuality is accepted social norm |
| 11. violence/rape as vengeance (at least one example, Joe Gage's HEATSTROKES) | 11. violence/rape as vengeance relatively common e.g. Russ Meyer's VIXEN; an exception is THOSE NAUGHTY VICTORIANS where the rapist-protagonist is raped himself at the end by a (black) assailant hired by his earlier victims. |
| 12. rape of unconscious (Curt McDowell's NUDES) or of bound victim. Gang rape, passive fantasies of rape are common in STH, often with straight perpetrators | 12. same narrative formula around sexual assault (woman hitchhiker trapped by car window and raped from behind); gang rape relatively less common because of intermale taboo. |
| 13. rape victim comes to like it | 13. extremely common in legit media as well as softcore and hardcore films |
| 14. SM, fisting, gadgets, fetishes (boots most common, followed by jock straps: rapid escalation of these motifs in seventies hardcore has apparently leveled off; a recurring minor presence in mainstream glossies (Blueboy), dominant in other specialized mags (Drum the most common SM glossy) | 14. SM motifs more and more common in mainstream glossies (Hustler) as well as stable minority proportion of hardcore magazines, arcade materials and films; some osmosis of iconography into legit media, punk culture, high fashion, etc. Women usually bottom (e.g. SWEPT AWAY ..., THE NIGHT PORTER) but not always (MAITRESSE). |
| 15. take-offs of legit media, especially with film titles e.g. LAST TANGO IN HOLLYWOOD | 15. same pleasure in taking off on legit media, especially with film titles. |
| 16. racial difference as narrative angle: rare in hardcore features where nonwhite men often appear without racial enunciation. Subgenre of beefcake and hardcore mags specializing in racial difference presumably for white clientele (but question of race of producers and consumers is for future research), e.g. "Boys of Puerto Rico." 22 of 110 STH anecdotes had some kind of racial enunciation, frequently with black narrator. | 16. several racist subgenres of hardcore and softcore films and other categories where women and men are enunciated racially, e.g. "mixed combos, dozens of Thai EMMANUELLE-spinoffs. Mainstream glossies are very white. |
| 17. cock-size narrative gimmicks constructed around certain stars and in titles, e.g. THE BIG SURPRISE. | 17. probably less explicit, though no less prevalent through implicit and documentary codes, especially in cheaper mags and films. Maids are much less common than in classical and European films, often replaced now by secretary fantasies. |
| 17. class enunciation relatively common, e.g. BOYS OF THE SLUMS; blue-collar fantasies are omnipresent. | 18. is straight male breast size fetishism equivalent to gay male cock size gimmickry?. |
| 19. as a general rule, theatrical films have a more important | 19. narrative content relatively less important |

narrative content than straight equivalents (Wakefield Poole's BIJOU flopped because it was criticized for "too much story.")

Relations of representation: extracting some ideological essences

Gay male pornography

1. phallus obsession, the closeup a metaphor of corporal fragmentation and alienation; phallocentrism however not an explicit text in this fantasy universe where people not divided according to presence or absence of cock — everyone has one.
2. self-hatred, gay eroticization of victimization of self (some STH anecdotes eroticize abusive homophobic "dirty talk")
3. racism: third world beefcake constructs spectator-object relation that is exact parallel of racist organization of society
4. ideology of gay liberation: sex-positive attitudes, valorization of "coming out," acceptance of gay identity and community, challenge to masculinism; sex industry as economic base of autonomous, prosperous ghetto and therefore of political clout.
5. ideology of the closet: valorization of straight image reflect internalized homophobia, self-oppression.

Straight male pornography

1. phallocentrism: women as universally available caterers to pleasure of phallus
2. woman-hatred: women as deserving and willing victims, whose victimization is eroticized
3. racism: nonwhite women as exaggeratedly sexual slaves, nonwhite men as instruments of patriarchal revenge.
4. ideology of sexual liberation? view of straight porn as therapeutic social safety valve, as vehicle of sex-positive values, espoused by straight male apologists and profiteers, by some social scientists, by some women pro-sex or libertarian feminists.
5. closest equivalent of self-oppression here is not in straight male pornography, which has no significant female audience, but women's romance pulp (Harlequins); men's lib line emphasizes straight male porn's oppression of men as well as of women.

Towards a summary: porn as index/echo/prop of political context

Gay male pornography

PLUS: Unlike straight male porn, gay porn does not directly and systematically replicate the heterosexist patriarchal order in its relations of production, exhibition, consumption, or representation. Kathleen Barry's assertion, "Homosexual pornography acts out the same dominant and subordinate roles of heterosexual pornography,"[5]cannot be shown to be true of any of these terms. Produced by, depicting, and consumed exclusively by gay men, the fantasy universe of gay porn resembles the gay ghetto in its hermeticism as well as in its contradictory mix of progressive and regressive values, in its occupancy of a defensible enclave within heterosexist society. It subverts the patriarchal order by challenging masculinist values, providing a protected space for non-conformist, non-reproductive and non-familial sexuality, encouraging many sex-positive values and declaring the dignity of gay people.

MINUS. At the same time, the ghetto is part of as well as separate from heterosexist society. The patriarchal privilege of male sexual expression and occupancy of public space is

Straight male pornography

PLUS: Porn as "liberated zone," social safety valve, as visualization of women's desire, as vehicle of the sexual revolution?

MINUS. Gender-defined sexual roles and power imbalances, both within the narrative (woman as insertee, active or passive, woman as victim, woman as fetishized

perpetuated. The patriarchy is propped up equally by the reinforcement of the gay male spectator's self-oppression, by his ghettoization. Finally, capitalism's usurpation and commoditization of the private sphere is extended not threatened by gay commercial porn.

object of the camera) and outside of the narrative (woman as spectator), replicate the power relations of patriarchal capitalism and are thereby both its symptom and its reinforcement.

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TOP: Ad for *Sex*, the third volume of collected anecdotes from *Straight to Hell*. These books have been longtime bestsellers in gay bookstores.

RIGHT: A Canadian law student friend of the author took these images of a classmate in his mother's back yard and on his bed respectively. Such "folk porn" is processed in labs that guarantee no censorship, as in the example on the lower right, or in a darkroom at home.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

A real raw place

Frame grabs from *Loads*



"I love the fact that I can't understand my films when I first make them. It feels like I'm making them out of a real raw place."[6] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Curt McDowell's *LOADS* (1980) is a 19-minute black-and-white gay porn movie that is so hot that it makes *KANSAS CITY TRUCKING COMPANY* feel like a three-hour Marguerite Duras film projected at half-speed. It is also a lot more than that, though this "more" amplifies the turn-on rather than legitimizes it.

Like most great works of eroticism, and like the erotic films of McDowell's fellow Bay Area homosexual, Barbara Hammer, *LOADS* is intensely personal, autobiographical, even confessional. The diary form tends to achieve a mixture of everyday images and fantasy overtones that is highly potent. As in the first-person anecdotes of *Straight to Hell*, the authentic ring of, "This is really true. I was really there," brings a vibrancy to even the tallest tale. The diaristic form also has a documentary graininess to it that enhances the impact, the spontaneity of camera twitches, the fragility of flares. Both Hammer's and McDowell's format is the low-budget independent non-sync-sound short film, an alternative form, borrowing from both documentary and experimental vocabulary, that knits well with an alternative eroticism. Slickness takes away from desire, Hefner's airbrushes notwithstanding.

Hammer and McDowell, however, live at opposite ends of the Bay. Her films have a Berkeley spirituality to them, even at her most carnal moments (the closeup labia-dabbling in *MULTIPLE ORGASMS*). Maybe it comes from her habit of linking eros to nature, whether it's the garden or the desert with all their iconographic associations in our culture; maybe it's the presence of a visible lesbian community throughout her films, the pervasiveness of sisterhood for all her obsessive egotistical sublime. With San Francisco-based McDowell, a cock is a cock is a cock. His landscape is the concrete of the streets, the filtered light of his non-residential-zone studio. But his physicality doesn't belong to the Castro, except for the overtones of camp — it belongs more to the Mission. Unlike Hammer, McDowell is usually alone. The faggot fellowship is nowhere in sight, the clone ghetto somewhere over the horizon. His love-objects are the Other, the Straight Man.



Needs caption

In fact, in *LOADS*, it's six Straight Men who swagger through the frame. The film narrates the filmmaker's encounter with each of them, on the street or in parks, his offer to film them jerking off. They all consented (though of course the filmic record doesn't include those who refused nor any real or threatened violence incurred), and the six intermingled episodes/ vignettes of the film are built from the resultant posing and sex sessions in McDowell's studio.

Suddenly spectators find themselves embarrassed voyeurs both of McDowell's tricks with the six men, and of the men's tricks with the camera. The men strut about defensively, as if taunting the camera, or they lie back invitingly, staring vulnerably, trustingly into the lens. They undress and caress themselves, or allow the filmmaker to help. The camera sometimes embodies McDowell's point of view, crawling across the floor in submission for the blow, trembling as if in echo of the spectators' excitement. Or else it remains aloof on its tripod for a breather with the pretense of immediacy temporarily dropped. At other times when McDowell needs both hands, one of the subjects holds the camera, adding the frisson of subjective angle to the palpability of micro-closeups of flesh. This is participatory camera taken as far as it will go, filmmaking as fellatio. The editing



preserves the feeling of participation and spontaneity, texturing the narrative lust with the temporal patterns of memory and obsession — echoes, stuttering, flashbacks. McDowell's half-confessional, half-conspiratorial voice-over adds to the complexity of the mosaic: "I wanted to be slung on his back, fucking him as he walked down the street."



In fact, McDowell doesn't fuck any of the men. And that's the point at which the film begins to expose "the raw place" of the filmmaker's desire and of our sexual culture as gay men of the post-gay-lib era. Like all eroticism shaped by a commodity- and image-enslaved patriarchy, McDowell's eroticism is deeply troubled, and troubling. I am speaking neither of the gospel of omni-pansexuality embodied in the gay male institution of tricking, nor of the objectification inherent in the image-making process in itself — at least not here. I am referring rather to the eroticization of the Not-Gay, the Straight Man. For some, it may be gratifying that the tables are turned. The straight man becomes erotic surface, objectified, both idealized and debased, the object of erotic obsession. It is an obsession frequently present in gay male pornography, as I've noted elsewhere, and an obsession that McDowell tackles head-on, exorcizing it and analyzing it as well as indulging it and perpetuating it:

"I have no idea why those straight men turn me on; I see that it's my own obsession — one of them."

"My real interest lies in things, like, I want to go on expeditions, and always document the sexual aspect of things. Like *National Geographic* ..."

"... since much of (current norms of) homosexuality is based on guilt and shame, I think you can realize that guilt is what is turning you on."

"... I'm hung up on straight men because they're like virgins. They've never done it with another guy. I like them for fantasy. But I wouldn't want to see them 'turn gay,' to become my lovers."



McDowell, then, is quite deliberate in confronting the contradictions of his sexuality, of gay sexuality in its current incarnation, but he doesn't pretend to be able to understand them, nor to resolve them — without the spectator's help.

The types of men McDowell is attracted to are telling. They are macho, some body-builders, mostly working-class, a few with tattoos, — none with the idealized beauty of *Blueboy* pornstars but in fact almost parodies of our culture's stereotype of masculinity were they not ultimately so ordinary. Their sexuality, not surprisingly, is deeply alienated. Most depend on images to masturbate to, propped on one elbow, thumbing the glossy magazine photos of women, the perfect image of the ideal sexual consumer of the post-Hefner age. One man even rubs his cock into the crack of the centerfold during and after his ejaculation. Of others, McDowell manages to capture the comic absurdity as they strut around trying to look cool with their pants down around their knees. Of still others he succeeds in registering an unexpected tenderness, a haunting vulnerability that matches his own, an openness to this experimental intermale exchange that subverts our rigid labels of sexual orientation. At the moment of his final montage of all six protracted ejaculations, McDowell adds the sound of thunder to the already exaggerated heavy breathing on the soundtrack, a hint of parody that is just the right touch to top off the "expedition," this exposure of the male sexual drive. The male body is both celebrated and decorticated, the rites of masculinity are both indulged and subverted.

As for the spectator, caught up in a mix of desire and outrage, guilt and complicity, amused distance and involvement, his disturbance remains long after the excitement has dissipated. Not your usual pornographic film, designed for easy consumption and disposal. This is the direction we must pursue if we are to attain an eroticism worthy of our political ideals. I do not mean the reworking of fuck-film formulae with ideological discourse and politically correct sexuality, nor the legitimization of eroticism "artistically" through self-reflexivity or modernist editing (though we should not exclude possibilities inherent in either of these avenues). I guess I mean an alternative practice, a grass-roots pornography to counter the industrial pornography; an eroticism that enhances our pleasure in our sexuality by starting from the raw place we're in right now and by responding to that place, without defensiveness or complacency, but with honesty, questioning and humor; a challenge to our sexuality as well as a celebration of it.

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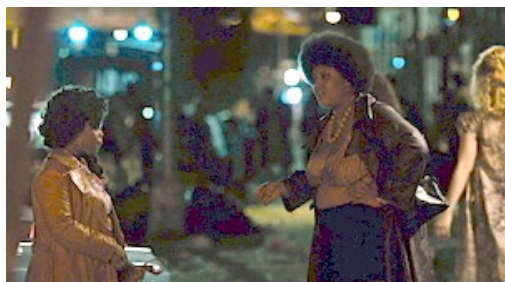
Notes

1. "Lesbians and Pornography," from transcript of workshop at the Pittsburgh Conference on Pornography 1980 in *off our backs* July 1980, p. 9. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York, 1981), p. 43.
3. Lisa Orlando, "Bad Girls and 'Good' Politics," *Village Voice* (Literary Supplement), December 1982, p. 16; Ellen Willis, "Who is a Feminist? A Letter to Robin Morgan." *ibid.* p. 17; Deidre English, "Talking Sex: A Conversation on Sexuality and Feminism," (with Amber Hollibaugh and Gayle Rubin), *Socialist Review*, No. 58, July/Aug. 1981, p. 51. [[return to page 2](#)]
4. Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (New York, 1979), p. 207. [[return to page 3](#)]
5. (*Ibid.*, p. 206.
6. Quotations by Curt McDowell are taken from interviews in *Gay News* (London) No. 229, p. 47 (by Jack Babuscio); *San Francisco Chronicle Datebook*, Pink Section, Feb. 8-14, 1981 (by Calvin Ahlgren); *Artbeat*, Dec. 81-Jan. 82, pp. 22-23. [[return to p. 4](#)]



JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Ruby, aka “Thunder Thighs,” working the Deuce.



Trying to look out for the new girl in town, Ruby admonishes Bernice



Bernice, having recently gotten “took,” listens to Ruby’s advice.



She asks Ruby, “What kind of bad?” But we never hear Ruby reply.

“What kind of bad?” Curtis Mayfield and *The Deuce*

by [Matthew Tchepikova-Treon](#)

Late in episode five of *The Deuce*: A prostitute named Ruby offers an underage girl new to the city advice on how to handle her johns and survive her pimp. “Make sure you get the money up front,” Ruby says. “Rodney ain’t as bad as the others, but you gotta bring your piece. You keep getting took, shit gets bad.” Sixteen-year-old Bernice asks, “What kind of bad?” Apart from Bernice’s most direct meaning—*What will Rodney do to me?*—her question could stand as the tagline for the entire show.

Every character navigating *The Deuce*’s hardscrabble world of a rapidly changing sex industry in 1970s New York City must constantly ask: What kind of bad will happen to me? What kind of bad am I willing to do? And what kind of bad is necessary? Beyond pure self-preservation, they ask: What kind of bad will I tolerate? Some also want to know: What kind of bad do I desire? And what kind of bad benefits me?

The question itself calls forth a world predicated on ruthless competition and hierarchical oppression devoid of refuge, where, despite best intentions, everyone plays a role and someone always gets paid. Some characters remain oblivious to these truths, yet others embrace or only half-deny them, while still more rationalize their overall inconvenience. Or, as Vincent Martino—the show’s mustachioed linchpin—puts it after his girlfriend, Abby, silently rebukes him for his matter-of-fact response to Ruby’s eventual murder just outside his bar:

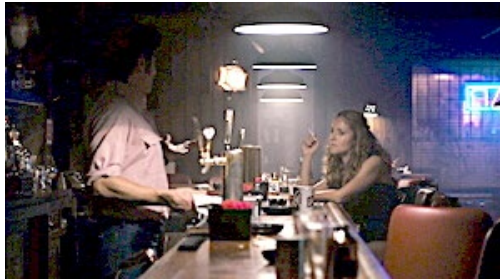
“You got me wrong. I love women. But it’s the Deuce.”

Throughout the first season of *The Deuce*, co-created by David Simon and George Pelecanos, we find a broadreaching story of New York City in the early 1970s that deals as much with city hall corruption as it does with pimps and prostitutes. It is as much about harbingers of gentrification as about the golden age of pornography’s materialization in Times Square. Consequently, we find Simon continuing his “methodical deglamorization of American cities and institutions,” as Alison Herman describes the series.^[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Yet, we also find a well-crafted period piece that deftly blends its grimy realist aesthetic with a sense of electric glamour that are part and parcel of the space and historical moment the show critically represents. Further still, as is common to the work of both Simon and Pelecanos, we also find empathetically drawn characters viewed in light of the painstakingly detailed capitalist systems that keep them all on the grind. But, in an audiovisual world populated by wolfish politicians, mob-financed massage parlors, insatiable police corruption, progenitors of mainstream porn production, and the capitalist rezoning of New York City’s red-light district, what we do not find is an easy answer to Bernice’s question, no matter who asks it.

From the beginning, however, *The Deuce* does let us know one thing: whether one



Standing next to Ruby's lifeless body on the sidewalk outside The Hi-Hat, Vincent and Big Mike assess the damage to the bar's awning. Abby looks on in discontent.



Vincent pleads his case.



HBO's promotional poster for *The Deuce*.

regards it with puritanism or prurience, no one escapes the most damning impulses and incentives available in modern U.S. cities. Like Curtis Mayfield attests to in the show's opening credits, "If there's a hell below, we're all gonna go." We hear Mayfield sing this titular line near the start of every episode of *The Deuce*, and always as a prescient statement on things to come. *What kind of bad?* The question resonates at the heart of Mayfield's song, which itself is heard throughout the show's first season.

What follows here is a close analysis of the song's sociological critique of inner-city life in 1970s United States as it pertains directly to *The Deuce*, highlighting the many ways it lends itself to the show—aesthetically and narratively—while also bringing the song's sound and ideas to bear on the show's central themes, utilizing Bernice's question as a recurring motif. Further still, by considering how *The Deuce* critically addresses the very culture industry it represents, I also historically outline Mayfield's own musical relation to the production of exploitation films popular in Times Square theaters during the 1970s in order to demonstrate the ways popular music participated in shaping the social space and cultural imaginary from which *The Deuce* takes its name.

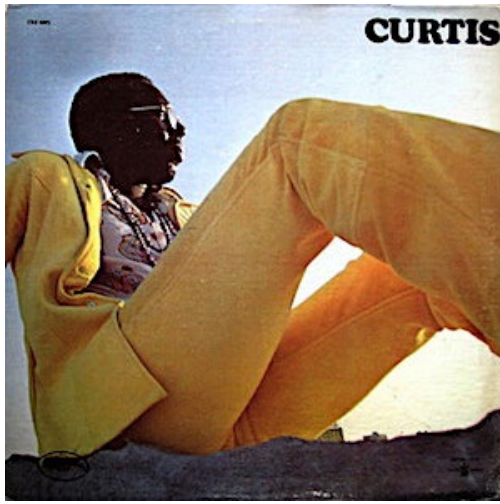
Opening credits

Released in 1970, just months after his departure from the Chicago pop-soul band The Impressions, Mayfield's debut solo album, *Curtis*, marked a seismic shift in his music, career, and social influence. With the album's opening track and lead single, "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below, We're All Going to Go," Mayfield stormed the gates of the Seventies with his own new funk-infused, politically-minded, psychedelic-soul sound. Held down by a thick fuzz-bass line, Mayfield and his band play a constant blitz of low brass swells, high horn hits, and burning string arrangements over a drumbeat punctuated by congas and a scratchy wah-wah guitar. Rhythmic rather than chordal movement drives the song from start to finish, and Mayfield's urgent voice tears through the mix. Lyrically and sonically, the song is an eight-minute tour of Cold War United States' most damaging contradictions sustained by the country's most precarious self-deceptions. As a result, the song is not your usual melancholic lament. Instead, Mayfield's upbeat jeremiad performs a direct social critique that is equal parts comedy, tragedy, and funk-soul tirade.

In its full-length version,[2] the song opens with the sound of a young woman professing salvation for all if people would just "read the book of Revelation." Mayfield is unconvinced. His "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below, We're All Going to Go"—eschatological in tone, yet meaningfully devoid of faith—proceeds to radically invert the musical tradition of black spirituals invoked by the woman's proclamation. If anything, Mayfield's Testamental tone performs a kind of secular deliverance. The year prior to the song's recording, during his first inaugural address, Richard Nixon had stood framed by a world on fire, calling for calm and restrained discourse. He said then,

"When we listen to the better angels of our nature we find that they celebrate the simple things, the basic things—such as goodness, decency, love, kindness. Greatness comes in simple trappings... To lower our voices would be a simple thing."

But Curtis Mayfield heard no angels in Nixon's United States. He saw only an illusive spectacle of violence and greed. So when we hear him sing, "There can be no show / And if there's hell below / We're all gonna go," during the opening credits of *The Deuce*, the song sounds made for this televised world.



Cover for the 1970 vinyl release of *Curtis*, self-produced and distributed on Mayfield's own label, Curtom Records.



[Click here to play opening credits.](#)

The title sequence for *The Deuce* stands as an artistic microcosm in its own right. [3] It is a carnival ride through Times Square that highlights the materiality of 70s-era film technologies, the maelstrom of people moving through the city, and the Deuce's luminescent sea of nighttime theater marquees. All the while, the show's theme song lays out its initial claim: "Everyone here is on the hook for something." Mayfield's roll call includes "sisters / brothers and the whiteys / blacks and the crackers / police and their backers," "...all political actors," "people running from their worries / ...the judge and his juries," students, pimps, dealers, educators, lawmakers, cat callers, war mongers and free lovers. Amidst the chaos, Mayfield's most direct and damning invocation comes when he repeatedly sings, "And Nixon talking 'bout, 'Don't worry.'"



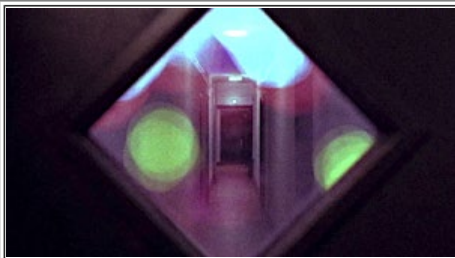
Cover for the album's lead single, on 7-inch, released in November 1970.

Underscoring the sardonic tone of this line, Nixon's words echo via an analog delay effect applied to Mayfield's voice. Evidence of an avant-garde impulse often relegated to the periphery of his music, here the foregrounded tape manipulation technique creates a peculiar haunting effect. Repetition contributes to the overall feeling of paranoia that rings throughout the song, with Nixon's doublespeak rippling out mantra-like, lingering in the mouths of others, producing an aural sensation of techno-indoctrination. Moreover, the timing of each echo, set roughly a quarter note apart, is slightly off so that after about two measures, each fading word begins to slip off the beat just enough to sound a touch more menacing, adding to the song's paranoiac uncanniness. Further still, in most instances the echo effect cuts off the initial attack of "don't," such that, after its first full utterance, the word "worry" alone distortedly loops like a siren. In this moment we hear Mayfield's foreboding alarm cut through the song's apocalyptic reproach. It is perhaps a sound of warning to resist the nihilistic tendencies that nonetheless inform the song elsewhere.

This moment of alarm envelops *The Deuce*'s opening credits as the show's title/logo first appears, followed by eight key visual moments in quick succession, all slightly obfuscated by the superimposition of flashing lights and degraded film stock running in multiple directions:



Street sign on the Deuce, overlaid with a running scene from an early porn film.



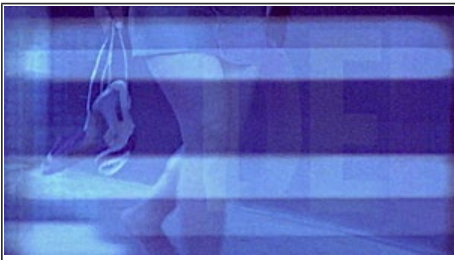
A window-framed hallway inside the hotel where the prostitutes working the Deuce take their johns (foreshadowing both the sex parlors and the season's final shot).



A pair of male hands counting cash. The physical exchange of cash is constantly seen throughout the show.



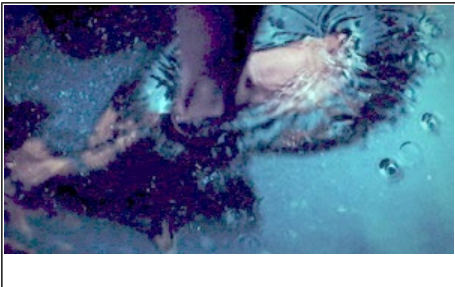
A stilettoed pair of legs running through the rain at night, which cuts to ...



... a quick shot of a woman's hand holding her high heels by morning.



The logo made to simulate film being pulled through a projector.



Then we see a bare foot step into a puddle in the street.

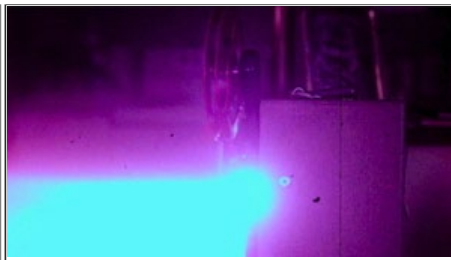


The water now reflects a distorted blue sky above.



And the presence of film stock again draws our attention to the significance of pornographic cinema's material form and aesthetic.

With the opening sequence's final shot, the diegetic world of *The Deuce* opens up sonically and we hear the woman's foot stepping in water, accompanied by the final sounds of Mayfield's song, just when the music, as if crossing some lethal sound barrier, suddenly gives way to a rumbling explosive sound of electric feedback. In the show's pilot episode, this sonic shockwave lingers, then fades out as the screen goes black and we hear: "Nah, man, that's some bullshit."



The early technology and materiality of 1970s exploitation film production features heavily throughout the show's opening credits.



Scratched film further works to highlight its own materiality, while it also aestheticizes the show's sense of historicity.



Shot of Times Square lit by theater marquees and seemingly endless signs and advertisements.



Another example of archival images from the Deuce used throughout the opening credits.

In the scene that follows, we watch two pimps—Reggie Love and C.C.—in New York Port Authority, prey on young women while carrying on a conversation in which they analogize Richard Nixon's threat to drop a nuclear bomb on Vietnam with their own coercive tactics for controlling prostitutes, or what we can imagine them boastfully referring to as the Sun Tzu-styled "art of pimping." Not so much a cipher for the show as a deep dive into the question of incentive, this conversation comparing the psyche of Richard Nixon to that of the street hustler poses the classic two-part question: What motivates the prostitute? What motivates the pimp?



A prostitute working the Deuce.



Clientele cruising the street.



Archival image of suggested local denizens.



Police sirens and lights represent a regular part of the Deuce's/*The Deuce's* audiovisual landscape.



Storefront for a sex shop where early porn loops where covertly sold



For the prostitutes working the street, before the emergence of the sex parlors, the show often visually emphasizes the difficult labor of street-walking.



The stairs of a hotel where prostitutes work.



The show's logo, embellished with a slight bit of film scratch.

If Mayfield's theme song in part functions like a casting call for a show ready to interrogate methodically every name on the list, which I argue it does, then *The Deuce* responds by transforming these social types into human beings on screen, [4] beginning with this scene in Port Authority. So, before returning to Curtis Mayfield's music, it is worth momentarily exploring this particular dialectic for the ways it helps demonstrate how the "What kind of bad?" motif, encapsulated in *The Deuce*'s theme song, permeates the show as an organizing principle for the characters who populate its world.

President Nixon pimping



Pimps Reggie Love and C.C. scouting new women in New York Port Authority. In this scene, both pimps portray a certain sense of predation and critical perception central to their characters

After the explosive sound that ends Mayfield's opening song fades into general crowd noise inside New York Port Authority, we hear a veteran pimp named Reggie Love, speaking in a manner of pomp and pontification, size up President Nixon:



“Man, every move that man make, he already got it mapped out. No, he ain’t being crazy at all. He’s acting like a motherfucking fox... You can see right where the man coming from. Shit makes perfect sense to me.”



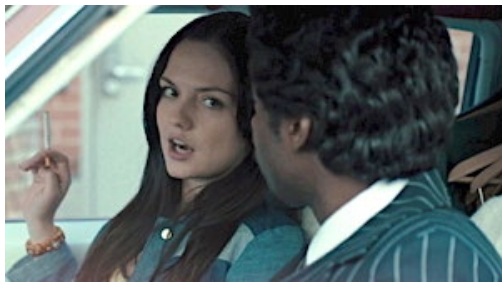
Reggie then tells C.C. that, when dealing with the Vietnam War, Nixon’s “carrot” comes in the form of peace talks, while his “stick” is him acting “crazy enough to do all kind of shit—bomb the shit out of Vietnam, take over Cambodia, whatever the fuck.” Slightly empathizing with Nixon’s diplomatic quandary, Reggie adds,

“If I was him I’d be flashing nuclear weapons and shit... I’m not saying I would use that shit. I’m saying I’d be like, ‘Do not fuck with President Reggie Love.’”



Then he draws his comparison, telling C.C. that, even though a pimp “don’t want to have to cut a bitch,” it is in his best interest if she thinks you might. To this point C.C. says,

“So, Nixon pimping? Well, shit yeah. That makes good sense to me.”



We soon meet Lori, in from Minnesota,[5] whom C.C. sweet talks into his Cadillac Eldorado and escorts into the city where she immediately begins working for him. The previously cited “What kind of bad?” scene between Ruby and Bernice represents the flip side of Reggie Love and C.C.’s conversation, but from the prostitutes’ perspective, in notably more practical (i.e., survivalist) and less philosophical terms. Unlike Lori, who finds a sense of glamor and perhaps even agency in streetwalking, Bernice only finds herself on the other end of Rodney’s proverbial stick.

Contrary to several reviews of the show, *The Deuce* is no simple allegory for capitalism,[6] and the complex dynamic I am gesturing at by comparing Reggie Love and C.C.’s conversation with that of Ruby and Bernice demonstrates precisely why. In these moments, especially when juxtaposed, we see the show’s dialectical approach to understanding relations between personal experience and society, or what C. Wright Mills named *the sociological imagination*. Through its characters, *The Deuce* explicitly strives to perform that particular “quality of mind” that Mills argues “enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals” that emerges from shifting perspectives.[7]

We hear C.C.’s “sales pitch” with Lori, eager to go with him. Once in C.C.’s car, Lori reveals she’s not as naive as C.C. might have originally thought, suggesting she came to NYC for precisely this reason.

In the world of the show, the prostitutes who work the Deuce, the parlors, and the porn sets are both object lessons for an oppressive system and human actors within that system—even if, for these women, demanding to be seen as human might prove fatal, as the tragic irony of Ruby’s advice to Bernice ultimately confirms. Likewise, in depicting the pimps, *The Deuce* methodically explores—through the lens of self as much as system—the particular complex of corrupt social, political, and economic incentives that inform their exploitative drive to accumulate both profit and power from these women.



Bernice after having been brought to the city by another prostitute named Darlene, for her pimp, Larry Brown.

For another pointed example concerning this question of incentive, consider Gentle Richie, *The Deuce*’s white hustler with a heart of gold who represents 1970’s-era hipsterism à la Norman Mailer (and Mayfield’s “whitey”). Everyone working the Deuce knows Richie as a one-woman pimp whose minimal amount of peacocking comes in the form of style and cool manner more than violence. In other words, to utilize Reggie Love’s opening analogy, Gentle Richie is more carrot than stick. In the third episode, this demeanor leads Larry, a far more



Brown sells Bernice to Rodney on account of her being underage, thus demonstrating the throwaway exchange-value of women's bodies at play here.



Ruby insists she has a name, thus asserting her identity and subjectivity—an act that ultimately incites her own murder.



Larry jabs at Richie for being a “communist.” Richie, slightly perplexed, argues with Larry. Larry asserts a sense of hyper-masculinity against Richie's softer style.

provocative pimp, to interrogate Richie while drinking at the Hi-Hat: “So, you a communist or some shit, right?” Then, in one of the show's most deeply humorous moments, Richie, speaking in his smooth, full-bodied falsetto, replies, “I don't know nothing about that, but I don't dig hierarchical oppression, man. I just don't.” He then speaks in genuinely loving terms about Rochelle, his one and only prostitute whom he refers to as his “everything, man.” Larry tries to remind him that “she your ho, Richie.” To which Gentle Richie comes back in half-baked Marxist terms with, “Yeah, but she controls the means of production, dig?” And even though the camera moves down the bar so that Richie delivers this line off-screen, his homespun rebuttal is no throwaway joke.

Sure, Larry admonishing Richie for being a bad capitalist could occasion a worthwhile Marxist critique of political economy and the sex industry in *The Deuce* well beyond the scope of my writing here. After all, Marx did in fact see prostitution as exemplary of alienated social relations in capitalism, analogously identifying the pimp as capitalist, the prostitute as worker-commodity, and the client as consumer in a holy trinity that reveals the forces of production charged by the sexual fantasies of the bourgeoisie.[8] But, again, though centrally concerned with the relations of production in a modern capitalist society vis-à-vis the double commodification of women's bodies as both worker and ware in the sex industry—be it prostitution or pornography[9]—as well as control over the spaces in which they labor, generating profits for almost everyone but themselves (and especially white men), *The Deuce* is no simple allegory for capitalism.

Richie's almost endearing egalitarian belief that Rochelle somehow operates outside of this economic structure, and thus counter to the oppressive relations manifest therein—which we know from Candy's story is a fiction—slyly satirizes the misapprehension of leftist idealism that undoubtedly generates a trite sense of subcultural capital for guys like Richie (i.e., countercultural types for whom the status quo is not all that bad). In contrast, for Larry, Richie's feminized “communist” tendencies insult Larry's own hardened belief that, for the pimp, power is everything.[10]

The racial dynamics in this joke are equally telling, and even more central to my study here. By the end of its first season, *The Deuce* shows us a transformed world of sex work where white men, whether running parlors, taking payments for protection, or producing pornographic material, take over the prostitution business, so to speak, and begin systematically pushing black pimps out of the so-called game. Though still getting paid, the pimps' profits now seem somehow abstracted from any sense of purpose. Attributing to pimps such a sense of purpose is a perverse interpretation, to say the least, but one that gets at how seriously *The Deuce* considers the subjective and the systematic as dialectically integrated and mutually constitutive.

During another of the show's moments of unexpected humor, three pimps—Larry, Rodney, and C.C., their women now working in the parlors instead of out on the streets—sit in a cafe and commiserate about their new found surplus of leisure time. C.C., speaking in existential tones, complains how “the other night, I didn't know what to do with my damn self. I went to a movie,” and tells them he saw *Fantasia*. Rodney laughs before avowing that he really likes the film's dancing hippos. The irony in this joke runs deep—not least of which because it makes a clever nod to the future Disneyfication of Times Square in cinematic terms—by gesturing toward two things: (1) the inevitable gentrification of 42nd Street, of which this story plays a major role, and (2) a future where this classic pimp figure—who was represented in so many 1970s films that ran in Times Square theaters, and thus became so influentially bound up in that historical space's cultural imaginary—will have no place in the Deuce. As C.C. puts it, they “have become extraneous in this whole situation.”



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Rodney commenting on the makeup Candy is wearing to try and cover the cuts and bruises on her face from having been beaten by an aggressive john days before. It is apparent to us in this scene that Rodney occasionally tries to convince Candy she would be safer with a pimp to protect her. Candy resists, claiming she prefers one-hundred percent of the money she makes.



Sandra Washington, inspired by *New York Magazine* writer Gail Sheehy, working to convince a prostitute to trust her and talk about the life.



Sandra speaking with Officer Alston, who tells her they both seek answers to many of the same questions.

Mayfield's ghetto imaginary and Sandra's "tricks of the trade"

Throughout season one of *The Deuce*, the character Sandra Washington, a journalist for *New York Amsterdam News* who brings a particular sociological credence to the show's investigative impulse within its own world, works to understand the "whole situation," as C.C. refers to it. *The Deuce* manifests and performs C. Wright Mills' notion of the sociological imagination most directly through Sandra. She circulates among the denizens of the Deuce, especially on the street and in the Hi-Hat, interviewing prostitutes and pimps, as well as briefly dating Officer Alston, who works the Deuce beat for NYPD. While exploring the question of motivation and incentive between the pimps and prostitutes, she also works methodically to uncover and report on the larger pay-for-protection racket instituted by police at varying levels of corruption.

However, offered no refuge from systemic pressures, no Archimedean point outside the world on which she reports, in the end, the political exposé she spends the entire season building towards is eventually gutted of its broader economic and social context by her editor for fear of political backlash. Her writing becomes little more than a "human interest story" about violent pimps and exploited prostitutes, one she had all along worked to resist.

A short exchange between Sandra and her editor at the *Amsterdam News* reveals a wealth of context about Sandra's character, her work, and her relation to the televisual world of the show. When first proposing the story, her editor dismisses the idea:

"Sandra, all we're doing is reinforcing the stereotypes, just like those goddamn ghetto flicks out there now. Everybody cheering for the Pusherman."

After accusing him of wanting "uplift only," Sandra exclaims, "I'm giving you life as lived." This reference to the Curtis Mayfield-scored blaxploitation film *Super Fly* (1972)—which contains the hit song, "Pusherman," about the film's hustling protagonist—recognizes a precedent for Sandra's mode of storytelling deeply rooted in Mayfield's own music as it relates to "ghetto flicks" and here to the Deuce, and thus Sandra's proposed piece for the newspaper. By blending the radical sonic innovations of Hendrix with the funk-soul prophecies of Sly Stone, though with a sharper political edge, Mayfield's "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below, We're All Going to Go" anticipated both the sound and cultural significance of many blaxploitation films that would come to define the Deuce as much as pornography. Though the song marks the only time we hear Mayfield's music during season one of *The Deuce*, it meaningfully gestures towards a larger story that the show's world-building techniques work to tell through significant peripheral details. By momentarily dwelling on the significance of several references to blaxploitation cinema vis-à-vis Mayfield's music, I hope to reveal an important through-line in *The Deuce's* aesthetic and its narrative.

The recording sessions for Mayfield's album *Curtis* also produced an early demo version of the song "Ghetto Child," which appears as bonus material on the album's 2000 rerelease, though it would first find its fuller, fleshed out, and



Alston introduces Sandra to Reggie Love.



Layout for Sandra's already highly edited story.



Upon realization, Sandra chastises her editor.



The two debate the merits of her story. The editor rejects her larger idea for presenting the "whole situation." Sandra protests.



ultimately retitled form as "Little Child Runnin' Wild" in 1972. The song opens Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Super Fly*. Playing over shots of East Harlem, Mayfield's song details the destitute conditions common to America's inner-cities and the hardscrabble lives of African Americans growing up in ghettoized neighborhoods. With lines like, "Broken home / Father gone / Momma tired / So he's all alone," and "Where is the mayor / Who'll make all things fair / He lives outside / Our polluted air," both the early demo version of the song and its subsequent rendering demonstrate Mayfield's particular sociological imagination performed through his music. Though singing from the South Side of Chicago, Mayfield's music, representative of a certain 1970s urban sensibility, connected him directly with the cinematic as well as street-level world of the Deuce during a time when, along with pornography, a related moral panic sprang up regarding another new kind of visibility: black masculinity on screen throughout inner-city second-run grindhouse theaters, as well as these films' audiences, especially in the Deuce.

David Church, in his analysis of Times Square as both a physical and culturally mediated symbolic space, argues,

"In addition to fears about sexually deviant audiences, fears over urbanism carried a racially charged component, as young African American audiences were often a vital demographic in the 1970s 'action houses' that had once been picture palaces now located in increasingly radicalized areas." [11] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Analyzing the particular action films commonly exhibited in these locations, Austin Fischer writes how blaxploitation cinema, which "emerged in response to a crisis in cinema audience numbers" as much as "shifts in postwar inner-city demographics," presented a "direct rejection of integrationism that had characterized postwar [films] featuring the mild-mannered, nonthreatening persona of Sidney Poitier," in favor of "confrontational separatist messages, articulated and enacted by altogether more assertive black heroes." [12] Additionally, Ed Guerrero argues that this cycle of early-Seventies blaxploitation films "helped shape a politically self-conscious, critical black audience aware of its commercial power and hungry for new cinematic representations of a diverse range of African American subjects and issues on the big screen." [13]

Therefore, in the context of blaxploitation's own history, Poitier represents the message of "uplift only" that Sandra censures her editor for wanting. For her, the inverted racial paradigms, such as those at play in these "ghetto flicks," speak to what motivates pimps such as Reggie Love, C.C., Larry Brown, and Rodney, things Sandra's editor fears as damaging to the black community but which Sandra considers a crucial piece of her reporting beyond the simple villain/victim dichotomy.

Though blindspots exist in Curtis Mayfield's own sociological imagination—his objectification of women is also a major shortcoming shared by *Super Fly* and many other blaxploitation films [14]—his attempt to tell stories about the disenfranchisement of black people in U.S. inner cities from his own perspective as well as that of pimps and drug dealers marks an early incarnation of the sociological imagination exhibited in *The Deuce*. As a nod to blaxploitation's sociocultural legacy, producers of *The Deuce* reference several of its historically significant films throughout the show, such as C.C.'s aforementioned Cadillac Eldorado that recalls the "pimpmobile" in *Super Fly*. Additionally, several songs from other blaxploitation films also play in bars and pool halls or are heard from passing cars in a number of scenes.

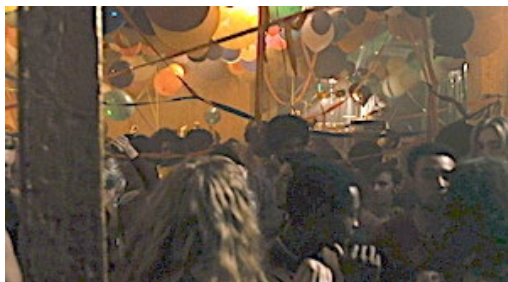
C.C. escorting Lori to his Cadillac Eldorado, the same make and model of car driven by Youngblood Priest in *Superfly*, famously lent to the film's producers by an actual pimp from Harlem named K.C. In the film, Curtis Mayfield sings the line, "My El D and just me," describing how central the car is to the pimp's identity on the street.



The timeline in *The Deuce*'s inaugural season also coincides with the *Deep Throat* phenomenon. In this shot, Lori can be seen leaving a high profile party for one of the film's screenings, her and C.C. having not been allowed to enter the VIP area.



As Paul and a friend climb a narrow stairway to the Loft, Paul questions what exactly their three-dollar cover charge to go dancing bought them at a place with no alcohol. His friend explains, "No booze, no liquor license, no raids, no mob owners." Paul quips in response, "And no profit." To which his friend replies, "Sweetheart, some things are more important than the bottom line."



Inside a unique site of disco's emergence.

But the more substantive reference made in Sandra's argument with her editor—a quintessential example of the "What kind of bad?" problem—reveals two important ways *The Deuce* intersects with Curtis Mayfield's music and cultural legacy beyond the show's opening credits: (1) Not only did a particular sociological imagination performed through a short-lived cycle of morally complex and questionable films come to reflect and reciprocally shape a tumultuous place like the Deuce proper (which, I would argue, we hear at its apotheosis in Mayfield's music); but (2) this fact in itself also reveals the larger significance of pop cultural production involved in telling the story of race, gender, and exploitation constitutive of the physical space and spatial imaginary represented in the show *The Deuce*.

Institutional melodrama, cultural production, and the culture industry

Focusing on the provenance of the 1970s "porn chic" phenomenon by studying both the industries and human actors directly or tangentially involved and affected by the rise of contemporary film pornography, *The Deuce* presents a certain dialectics of hide and seek where one form of sex work, once hidden, emerges as mass spectacle, absorbed into the mainstream, while another form, once out in the open, finds itself systematically pushed indoors, consigned to semi-private spaces. From its investigation of this dialectic, by now we can see how, in many ways, *The Deuce* constitutes an extension of what Linda Williams, in her extensive study of *The Wire*, identifies as an "institutional melodrama" that resists "the simplistic vilification" of evil common to classical melodrama, i.e., the exact kind of reductionism Sandra tried to sidestep in her reporting. By utilizing certain modes of counterpoint storytelling particular to serialized television, institutional melodramas, Williams argues, lay bare the myriad networked connections between industry, institution, and human actor as such by embracing the most entertaining aspects of its unique cultural form.[15] Thus, *The Deuce* works as a sprawling interrogation of pornography and its discontents in large part because the show's creators understand the value of entertainment as something other than a dirty word.

Moreover, *The Deuce* represents an institutional melodrama explicitly in the way that it deals with the very culture industry to which the show itself belongs. Not without its ironies, *The Deuce* follows what Alison Herman describes as

"the evolution of prostitution and the birth of large-scale porn production in a medium—on a specific network, even—that's been criticized for its gratuitous and sometimes violent sexual content."

By portraying sex and the culture industry, even through a meta-cinematic lens, *The Deuce* undoubtedly runs the risk of re-exploiting the bodies made visible on screen.[16] But this issue itself points to something crucial at stake with regard to the potential payoff for such a proposition: The "absolute power of capitalism," as Adorno and Horkheimer argue, industrializes all aspects of culture and all forms of human behavior in modern societies through its invisibility, where "even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system." [17] In this regard, then, *The Deuce*'s act of illuminating the particular industries that are part and parcel of this iron system can itself work to transform these industries by first recognizing and then trying to understand them. In other words, by examining certain particularities of how the industries that mediate sex and culture, and their respective historical processes, intersect with the show's own mode of cultural production, *The Deuce* tries to make visible (i.e., *recognize*) that which too often takes place behind the scenes, so to speak, and in so doing strives to reveal the machinations at work, so that, even if it cannot overcome them, it can at least call them to testify. Or, as



Disco legend David Mancuso spinning through the night.



Paul's music and LSD-infused glimpse of a possible future transformed by this space.



The performer here is Garland Jeffreys, the 1970s NYC musician of African and Puerto Rican descent who used to perform in blackface around the city. The song "96 Tears" was written and originally recorded in 1966 by Bay City garage rock progenitors ? and the Mysterians. In 1971, rock critic Dave Marsh of *Creem* magazine, listening back through the musical detritus of the previous decade, searching for the origins of a new musical form on the verge of cultural coalescence, described the band as "punk rock" in a column often cited as the (at least journalistic) origins of the term. *Creem*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (May 1971).



Big Mike just before he gets up to dance.

Linda Williams again argues, "the defeat of evil by good" may not be essential to melodrama,

"but what is essential...is the dramatic *recognition* of good and/or evil and in that recognition the utopian hope that justice might be done."

It means identifying and then taking seriously the show's own central question: What kind of bad?

Following their momentous claim about the "absolute power of capitalism" vis-à-vis the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer proceed to demonstrate how the economic forces of rationalization work in modern cities—full of "decorative industrial management buildings," "huge gleaming towers," "slums," and "city housing projects" designed to reproduce the capitalist system's dominion over the individual. Because these same forces work over mass entertainment, popular music, and cinema, Adorno and Horkheimer argue for the need to see how modern culture "impresses the same stamp on everything." [18] However, if "the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry," as Adorno and Horkheimer would have it, Michael Denning reminds us that "culture is the product and result of labor, part of the same process." [19] Such an insight aptly applies to a television show so centrally concerned with institutionalized labor, be it sex work, porn film production, policing, organized crime, public policymaking, and newspaper reporting, or art and mass entertainment.

Here again we see the significance of pop cultural production in *The Deuce's* world-building techniques for an institutional melodrama itself about the culture industry at large. Through a particular sociopolitical verisimilitude that, at the very least, identifies the stakes in certain radical acts of cultural production, *The Deuce* turns pop cultural reference into reverence for the shared cultural project labored into existence by the denizens of 1970s Manhattan (and beyond, e.g. Curtis Mayfield). Because, as I have hopefully demonstrated, as much as *The Deuce* is about the physical space and the spatial imaginary of 1970s Times Square, it is no less about a cultural imagination historiographically imprinted upon one of the most mythologized and revisited confluences of space and time in pop culture history—a fact the show directly engages through music as much as moving images.

In addition to Mayfield and the music of blaxploitation cinema, we again witness *The Deuce's* expressed reverence for radical acts of cultural production through its invocation of NYC's early ad hoc disco club "the Loft" in a scene where Paul goes to a warehouse in the city's former manufacturing district for the invite-only dance party Love Saves the Day. This is David Mancuso's place at 647 Broadway, a spot central to the formation of disco as a recognizable music/dance cultural formation. Dancing to Dorothy Morrison's rapturous, southern gospel-tinged R&B cut "Rain" and then "Melting Pot" by Booker T. and the M.G.'s, Paul looks around the room, transfixed, as if momentarily glimpsing an altered future yet unrealized. In a post-Stonewall Inn moment—referenced by multiple characters as a lingering event where the policing of bodies and spaces reached a particular tipping point that led to violence while also signaling the possibility of resistance—perhaps what Paul, a recent target of an illegitimate NYPD sting at a gay porn theater, sees in this moment is the potential for music to create spaces of liberation, even if only temporarily.

Similarly, in one scene during the season finale, Vincent walks into the Hi-Hat, uncharacteristically packed with bohemian-looking youths dancing to a live cover of the proto-punk song "96 Tears." Caught off guard, Vincent shouts to Abby, "What the fuck is going on?" Abby says she heard the band playing at a rent party down on St. Mark's Place, the famed East Village strip home to experimental jazz



Abby and friends attempting to describe the sound of the band.



Their amused reaction to Vincent mistaking "glam band" for "gang bang."



Everyone in the Hi-Hat dancing, Vincent lost in the back, uncertain and momentarily alone in his own place.

and first-wave punk rock clubs. After Abby explains that she and Paul decided to experiment with bringing live bands into the bar, Vincent asks, "Why's the singer got all that shit on his face? I thought that went out with Al Jolson?" He soon turns to the Hi-Hat's de facto bouncer Big Mike, sitting at the bar, and asks him, "What's it all mean?" To which Big Mike responds, "I don't know. But I kind of dig it," and then accompanies a woman onto the makeshift dance floor in front of the band. Vincent looks on with his usual expression of placid skepticism toward the new and unusual. Abby then asks two women at the bar what they think, adding, "Not your usual guitar hero shit, right?" One woman compares the band to a street-hardened Velvet Underground more so than "Ziggy." The other woman agrees, saying, "Not really glam band," which Vincent, now sounding a bit nonplussed, mishears as "gang bang."

He then looks out on his bar with what paradoxically seems a fleeting recognition of the potential transformative significance of that which he professes not to understand: a collapse of history in the form of a three-minute song performed in blackface simultaneously calling up a refracted and shopworn story of early rock music, the racist origins of U.S. sound cinema, and the transubstantiation of NYC punk rock's historical future in this small semi-underground (both literally and figuratively) bar now bursting with, but also subsumed by, all these inherited signifiers brought to bear on a single moment, a shared utopian impulse as fleeting as Vincent's curiosity for what it all means. In the crush of dancing bodies, Abby snaps a photograph of the band just before the scene ends.

Closing credits

At the close of this final episode, the Hi-Hat is now empty save for Vincent and Abby—the sound of police presence outside reminding us about Ruby's murder. Vincent, having just told Abby, "You got me wrong. I love women. But it's the Deuce," walks over to the jukebox.



Abby's expression of discontent.




The bar now transformed somehow.



Gentle Richie requesting some Grateful Dead.



Rudy Pipilo chiding Vincent for the bar's new record selection

| | |
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|  |  |
| Vincent fills the space (between him and Abby) with music. | A restless Larry unable to eat. |

Up to now, this jukebox had been a regular point of (mostly) humorous contention throughout the season. In one scene, Vincent's brother, Frankie, bashes it with a baseball bat to protest extortion perpetrated by an Irish mob muscle man. In another scene, during the bar's grand opening, Gentle Richie asks if "there's any Grateful Dead in the juke," and there isn't. Moments later, mob boss Rudy Pipilo expresses his contempt for black music's popularity at the Hi-Hat (and presumably popular culture at large) and in racist terms asks Vincent, "What's with all this jigaboo shit? I had six Dean Martins in there."

And closing out the final episode, Vincent, perhaps to cut the silence between him and Abby, perhaps to avoid talking, or perhaps to drown out the sound of NYPD out front, puts in a quarter, makes his selection, and "Careless Love" by Ray Charles begins to play. The song fills the room. Within seconds, the song's acoustic quality shifts into a noticeably non-diegetic timbre, transferring us out of the Hi-Hat, and the season's closing montage begins. We then see and hear the fallout of season one as Ray Charles sings:

"Oh, careless love / Love, please tell me / What have I done / For you to hurt me all in fun."



Vincent's brother Frankie and members of the mob playing craps in one of their new parlors.

In the offices of the *Amsterdam News*, we watch Sandra open that day's copy of the paper, her edited-down story "Tricks of the Trade" buried deep inside. During this moment, Ray Charles sings, "Well, you know / That I once was blind / But know I see / I say that I once was blind / But now I see," repurposing the famous refrain from "Amazing Grace." This allusion recalls Curtis Mayfield's own prescient testimony from the show's opening, his variation on the theme of black spirituals and the long history of African-American musical forms. A few moments later, the season closes on a lingering shot of Bernice working in Vincent's parlor before she disappears into her room, and we see another jukebox standing at the end of the long hallway. If we think back, Mayfield's "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below, We're All Going to Go," having traversed the



Sandra's stripped-down "Ticks of the Trade" article.

infernal strip of 42nd Street between 7th and 8th Avenues through the show's first season, now sounds as much like a coda to the show as it did a prelude.

Perhaps this transformation is best summed up by Reggie Love late in the season's fifth episode, aptly titled "What Kind of Bad?" In a barber shop, talking about music with Officer Alston and Gentle Richie, Reggie breaks down what he hears as the essential sonic and near-spiritual qualities of the music produced at Motown's home recording studio. Claiming that Motown singers record their voices through pipes in the walls of the building, he says,

"The voice go through the ducts and pick up the soul of the place on the way."



The long hallway of Vincent's sex parlor, jukebox standing at the end.



Reggie Love pontificating about sound transformed by the particularities of a space.

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Notes

1. Alison Herman, "How Michelle MacLaren Brought *The Deuce* to Life," *The Ringer*, September 6, 2017.
<https://www.theringer.com/tv/2017/9/6/16260860/michelle-maclaren-the-deuce-interview> (Accessed December 14, 2017) [[return to text](#)]
2. Full version of Curtis Mayfield's "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below, We're All Going to Go": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1xmXOP3lhM>
3. Designed by Matthew Boorus and Alex Hall.
4. This phrasing, "transforming these social types into human beings," is influenced by Lorrie Moore, "In the Life of *The Wire*," *New York Review of Books*, October 14, 2010, as cited in Linda Williams, *On The Wire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 29.
5. In the 1970s, another common nickname for the Deuce was the "Minnesota Strip," referring to the high number of young women reportedly moving to NYC from the Midwest, either to work as prostitutes, such as with Lori's character, or with hopes of performing on Broadway or making a career in modeling, but instead end up working in the sex trade. See: Philip Jenkins. *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 114. Thanks to J. Hoberman for bringing this historical reference to my attention.
6. E.g., Laura Hudson, "*The Deuce* Isn't About Sex. It's About Capitalism," *Wired*, October 30, 2017. <https://www.wired.com/story/the-deuce-hbo/> (Accessed December 14, 2017)
7. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7. In her book *On The Wire*, Linda Williams builds on George Marcus' notion of "multi-sited ethnography," and similarly utilizes the term "ethnographic imaginary," arguing, "Serial television melodrama makes possible the larger canvass of the ethnographic imaginary" (15). Though certainly influenced by Williams' analysis of *The Wire*, on which more later, I use Mills' term here instead because its theoretical application more closely resembles my analysis of Curtis Mayfield's music in relation to *The Deuce*.
8. See: Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Buffalo, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1987), 133.
9. For a detailed study on Marx, commodity fetishism, and pornography, as well as further exploration of the ways "woman-as-commodity exists both as a natural body with a *use value* and as a body with a socially constructed *exchange value*," see Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 115. Also see Esther Leslie's discussion of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and prostitution through Benjamin's writings on historical materialism in *Walter Benjamin:*

10. On the notion of the “feminized communist,” of which Richie represents here, see Joan Tronto, “Hunting for Women, Haunted by Gender,” eds. Terrell Carver and James Farr. *The Cambridge Companion to the Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 134-151.

11. David Church, *Grindhouse Nostalgia: Memory, Home Video, and Exploitation Film Fandom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 86. Also, for an early study of 1970s movie houses specializing in blaxploitation films, see Demetrius Cope, “Anatomy of a Blaxploitation Theater,” *Jump Cut*, no. 9 (1975), 22-23. [[return to page 2](#)]

12. Austin Fischer, “Go West, Brother: The Politics of Landscape in the Blaxploitation Western,” eds. Austin Fischer and Johnny Walker, *Grindhouse: Cultural Exchange on 42nd Street, and Beyond* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 184.

13. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 137.

14. For more on this point, see Cristopher Sieving, “Super Sonics: Song Score as Counter-Narration in *Super Fly*,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 13.1 (2001): 77-91.

15. Countering much of the dominant discourse repeatedly certifying *The Wire* as a “tragedy,” Williams utilizes the term “institutional melodrama” as a means of exploring the relation between the show’s serial form and sprawling content, arguing that the “undeniable innovation of *The Wire* is its effort to tell a melodramatic story at the level of the social institutions that have themselves repeatedly failed to serve justice.” *On The Wire*, 135.

16. See Alison Herman’s article for more on how Michelle MacLaren, who directed the show’s pilot episode as well as its season finale, describes the ways she and the show’s production team, including its writers, worked to address this fact.

17. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 258.

18. *Ibid.*, 259.

19. Michael Denning, “Work and Culture in American Studies,” eds. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman. *The Futures of American Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 433. In his article, Denning proposes what he calls a “labor theory of culture” as a corrective to cultural theories invested in ideology critique that ignore the social processes of labor-power, arguing for a consideration of modern culture not just as the production, accumulation, and distribution of commodities, but also as work.



Lost in my library

by Chuck Kleinhans

Reviews of

- Jon Lewis, *Hard-Boiled Hollywood: Crime and Punishment in Postwar Los Angeles*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017.
- Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, eds. *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2015)
- Zeinabu Irene Davis, *Spirits of Rebellion*, DVD, 101 min., Wimmen with a Mission Productions.
- James Naremore, *Charles Burnett: A Cinema of Symbolic Knowledge* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017)
- Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (DVD), Milestone Film and Video.

I'm a lover of books, or maybe better, someone who has a lot of books. I'm not like a collector who treasures books (though I do treasure some art books), but I've always had a close relation to books. Before I could read, I memorized some little kid's book—I think it was about a bear—and told the story, word for word, while turning the pages at the right place. This convinced my paternal grandmother I was a budding genius who absorbed reading without any instruction. I remember my mom trying to explain it wasn't so, but I think grandma liked the fantasy and wouldn't give it up.



Chuck's garage in Eugene, converted into a library with stacks.

Spending most of my adult life as an intellectual, an academic and an editor, I've always done a lot of reading and handled a lot of books (and articles, periodicals, etc.). What I'd like to do hear is talk about them in a more informal way than a genuine full-bore review. A good review is a challenging task. And it should be pretty objective and fair. But I've often found.

Usually I do not write about books written by friends and colleagues, as distinct from professional acquaintances. Book and media reviewing protocols prohibit crossing the personal/professional boundary because close personal ties likely would influence how the reviewer evaluated the work's quality or importance. (At least this is the standard in science, social science and humanities. The art world routinely disregards this boundary.) I've followed this idea as a writer and editor, but often I'm aware that in limiting myself, I kept readers from knowing about important and lesser known projects. So here, under the banner of full disclosure, I've decided to publish some things about works by friends and colleagues that I think are politically important today.

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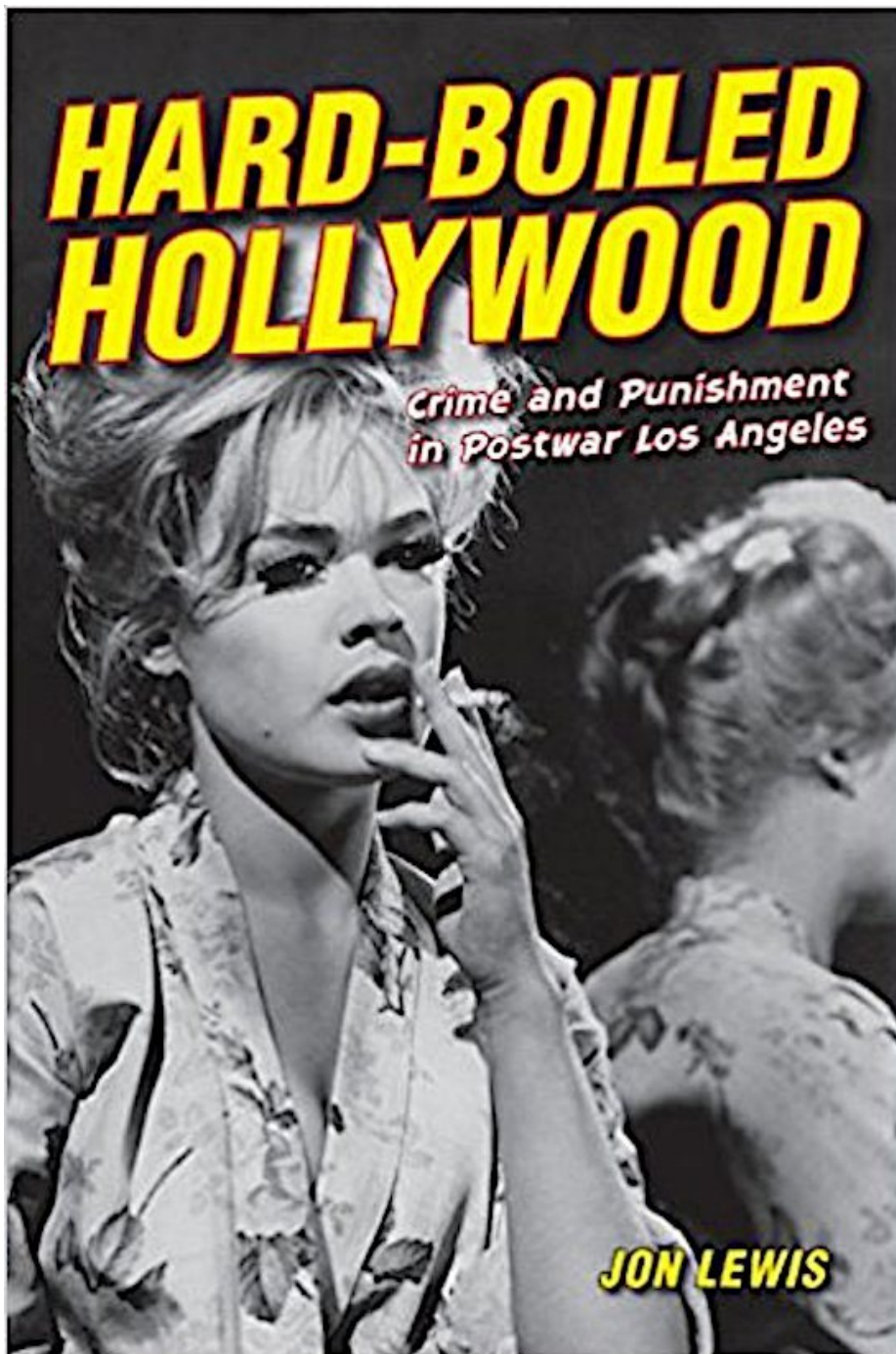
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The press of noir

Jon Lewis, *Hard-Boiled Hollywood: Crime and Punishment in Postwar Los Angeles*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017.



In the United States, theatrical film attendance hit an historic high during the World War II years, but Hollywood experienced a precipitous decline in the

postwar era. Jon Lewis investigates the aftermath while bracketing the situation with two notorious deaths: the “Black Dahlia” murder in January 1947 and the death of Marilyn Monroe in August 1962. Lewis achieves a very sophisticated and complex level of analysis by picking up and reweaving some familiar strands:

- the decline of the studio system,
- Los Angeles city corruption (especially in the police force),
- the expansion of the greater Los Angeles urban area with new residential suburbs,
- the dark genre of films noir,
- the presence of organized crime,
- the changing nature of the star system,
- the expansion of celebrity culture and professional gossip journalism.

Perennial interest in the film noir genre provides the most familiar approach to this broad topic. Such work usually bends in the direction of cinema aesthetics and reading a pessimistic cultural mood in film art. But another common approach involves the political and labor situation of the Hollywood blacklist. More recently urban political geography provided a fresh take on surveying the scene, and the emerging new approach of production studies combines an industrial and economic frame with a cultural and artistic approach.

Lewis clearly draws on this base, but makes it his own with a close reading of the public record, especially as represented in the local L.A. press. He describes his project like this:

“a history of Hollywood—the geographic site and the notional construct—built upon stories of the fallen the stricken, the dismissed, discarded, and exiled during Hollywood’s awkward adolescence stretching from the decline of the classical era after World War II to the beginnings of a new Hollywood in the 1960s.”

Los Angeles is and long has been a company town (well, an industry town), with lots of the population working directly in the entertainment complex or dependent on it through secondary or tertiary services. Thus society and entertainment gossip news is actually interwoven with the financial and employment situation. A scandal that torpedoes a prospective film can mean a cascading series of economic effects. So, with this framing, Lewis’s close reading of a long decade of the local press (though apparently not much of *Variety*) gives a close description of many otherwise scattered and minor moments (the slow stages of a crime investigation leading to a trial, or not, etc.). At the same time, he can draw on the many (and often elaborately conflicting) works done by previous investigators of the Black Dahlia murder, the death of Marilyn Monroe, the presence of mobsters such as Bugsy Siegel and Mickey Cohen, and so forth.

Today we’re familiar with some of this terrain by way of interesting neo-noir films that deal with the postwar L.A. scene: *Devil in a Blue Dress* (d. Carl Franklin, 1995), *Mulholland Falls* (d. Lee Tamahori, 1996), *L.A. Confidential* (d. Curtis Hanson, 1997), *This World, Then the Fireworks* (D. Michael Oblowitz, 1997), *The Black Dahlia* (d. Brian De Palma, 2006), *Hollywoodland* (d. Allen Coulter, 2006), *Gangster Squad* (d. Ruben Fleisher, 2013), as well as various outliers such as *Inherent Vice* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2014) set c. 1970, and some of the more evocative streaming serials such as *Bosch* (2014-) using L.A. Noir style.

Hard-Boiled Hollywood captures the deep contradiction between Los Angeles as a city changed from a desert into a metropolis by optimistic arrivals who aspired to success one the one hand, and on the other the harsh reality that in post-war Los Angeles most do not climb the pyramid. Some rise for a while but also end up falling.

Where Lewis sets a new direction is in trying to understand the particular constellation of factors that led to this phenomenon by considering women at the center. The gradual collapse of the old studio system meant that aspiring female actors trying to break into acting in Hollywood had few opportunities. A key was “being seen” and “making connections” which turned on going out to clubs and bars at night to connect with men with some relation to the industry or who were around. As the press began to notice and publicize a string of murders of young women with corpses dumped often by a roadside, connections were drawn to gangsters, corrupt cops, drifters, wannabees, and prostitution. At the same time, gossip journalism (in Hollywood led by two women: Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper) was powerful and successful at hyping print circulation while shadow boxing with an array of celebrities, studio fixers, agents, publicists and others on the periphery.

Somewhat surprisingly for a film scholar, while mentioning many different films of the era in passing, Lewis discusses only three major films with any depth: *Sunset Boulevard* (d. Billy Wilder, 1950), *In a Lonely Place* (d. Nicholas Ray, 1950), and *The Big Knife* (Robert Aldrich, 1955). And they are given very spare attention. However the Ray film does get an excellent analysis in the volume on it by Dana Polan in the BFI Film Classics series: *In A Lonely Place* (London: British Film Institute, 1994). And the greater context of young women’s situation in the 30s to 60s transition is extensively and originally covered in a series of works by cultural historian Paula Rabinowitz, most notably the outstanding *Black & White & Noir: America’s Pulp Modernism*. (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

Film noir, and neo-noir, is a rich topic already enriched by quality academic analysis. But the strength of Lewis’s book, for me, is just how provocatively suggestive it is, so I can’t resist thinking of it in terms of very original (and regrettably, too little known work such as the masterful pastiche of L.A. as seen in the movies, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (d. Thom Anderson, 2003). Or a one of a kind gritty realist film of Native Americans in Los Angeles’ depths, *The Exiles* (d. Kent Mackenzie, 1961), and the visual essay of a contemporaneous little star, *Debra Paget, For Example* (d. Mark Rappaport, 2015) now streaming on Fandor.

[Full disclosure: Jon Lewis is an old friend; we’ve edited each others work, shared a lot, and discussed a lot of films.]

Random thoughts about L.A. today

I’m always impressed by the many billboard and newspaper ads for discount dental implants and plastic surgery when I’m in L.A. The local evening news always leads with crime and auto accidents and traffic jams (often documented with competing news helicopters) for the first ten minutes before shifting to entertainment business and gossip for the rest of the half hour. The now familiar (and cheap to produce) *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood* TV shows began as Los Angeles local news outlet news and features segments. In 1981 *ET* sprung out as its own half hour show.

Currently I enjoy a reality tv version of L.A. Noir. I’ve started watching a streaming series on Netflix, *Shot in the Dark*. It follows several different and competing news stringer cameramen (a novice woman arrives later in the series) who work fires and accidents at night in greater Los Angeles for brief news items that will show in the morning local news shows. They are like paparazzi but for disasters, not celebrities.

Each show pits three different teams racing against each other for winning the nighttime sweepstakes of having your footage accepted, shown, and paid for by

the various TV stations (including Hispanic, given the local demographics). Pulling it all together is a recurrent virtual map of LA that allows the viewer to see an event location (a fire, a major accident, a police manhunt, etc.) and the locations of competing cameramen racing their cars to get to the scene. It's all presented as if happening the same night, though I suspect that is artificially packaged—or else they have an incredible number of camera people covering the competing camera men.

This is a perfect guys hardware series. The camera operators drive really nifty new street racer-type vehicles (think Fast and Furious), which are then wildly equipped with communications gear, onboard computers, etc.. Once on the scene they grab their digital camera rigs and rush to as close as they can get (police or fire may have cordoned off the scene) and shoot as first responders do their work. They then return to their vehicle and immediately send off the footage to broadcast news outlets that will hopefully buy it. And off to the next shoot.

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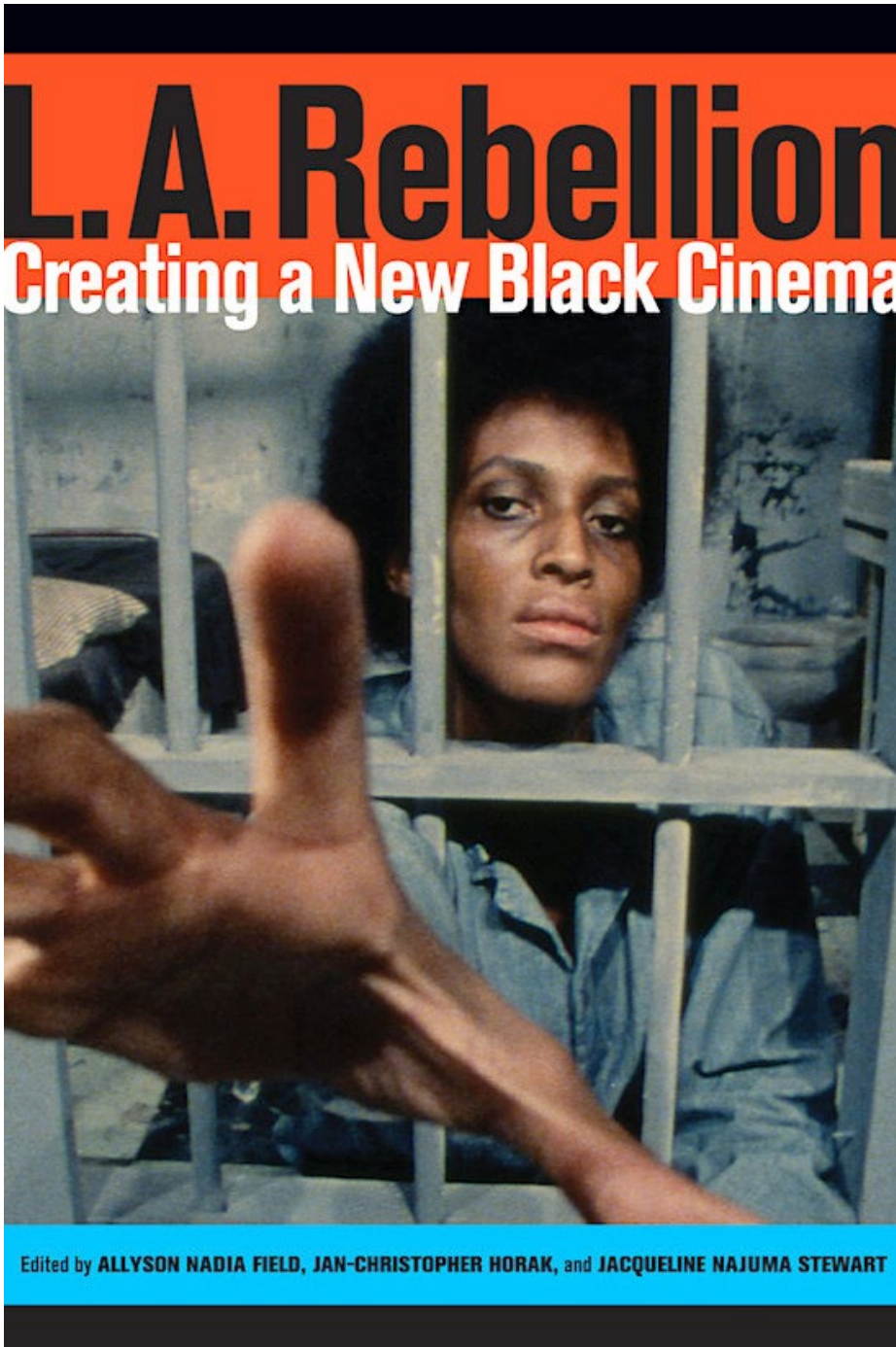
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Appreciating rebellion

Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, eds. *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2015)



A model for future studies of film movements and moments, *L.A. Rebellion*:

Creating a New Black Cinema provides an outstanding resource for understanding African American filmmaking. The end result of a complex and multi-phased effort to look at the most significant black media community in the post WW2 era, the volume builds on earlier work in collecting, archiving, restoring, interviewing, and developing critical research into the life and work of black independent filmmakers in Los Angeles from the late 1960s to the early 1990s.

[Full disclosure: I have an essay in the volume. I've known Horak for decades as a writer, editor, and friend, and Stewart was my department colleague at Northwestern University for some years. But my judgment of the volume's excellence isn't mine alone: it received the best edited volume award from the Society for Cinema and Media Studies at its 2017 conference.]

The term "L.A. Rebellion" was coined by critic Clyde Taylor as a branding strategy for showcasing the dynamic black films coming out of a community of young African, Caribbean, and African American film students and makers, especially around the University of California in Los Angeles. Operating within the company town context of Hollywood, and following after the Watts Rebellion in the 60s black community, UCLA as a state public institution had some leeway to open its admissions and give minority students an opportunity to learn filmmaking and gain access to equipment. A generation of remarkable filmmakers emerged: Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Julie Dash, Jamaa Fanaka, Zeinabu irene Davis, Billy Woodberry, Alile Sharon Larkin, and many more. By and large these artists' primary goal was to make expressive films about vital concerns of the black community: matters that were seldom represented in mainstream commercial media. In part this reflected a historical omission of genuine black input into the dominant culture, in part it contained a validation of the creativity and imagination of a subordinated community, and in part it embodied a rising generation of ambitious artists' aspirations.

Following introductory survey essays, the anthology presents a good array of in-depth critical studies, a fascinating collection excerpts from the long-form interviews with the filmmakers (arranged by topics) and concludes with an invaluable comprehensive filmography and bibliography. The critical essays make the previous writings on the L.A. Rebellion (often synthetic overviews highlighting Gerima, Dash, and Burnett) seem well-intentioned but out-of-date. Allyson Nadia Field looks at the early first year student films of the first wave of the Rebellion group which show vibrant political, ethnic, and aesthetic crossings: multicultural and collaborative.

White-controlled Hollywood's Blaxploitation genre of the early 70s is often dismissed and contrasted with the "realness" or authenticity of the Rebellion films. But by considering Jamaa Fanaka (*Penitentiary*, etc.), in particular, Chris Horak upends that commonplace. Fanaka was able to make commercially successful features, very popular with black audiences, and also militantly fought for black filmmakers entry into the white guilds and the motion picture Academy itself long before the current wave of activism. David James and Morgan Woolsey each contribute essays on the Rebellion works in relation to their use of music as an expressive part of the works. And Michael Martin reconsiders the connection to the international phenomenon of Third Cinema.

Two critical essays take matters to a higher level. In "Bruising Moments: Affect and the L.A. Rebellion" Samantha Sheppard wants to understand "how characters personalize...the broader trauma, triumphs, tragedies, and anxieties peculiar to African American lived experiences." Looking closely at Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts*, Bernard Nicolas' *Daydream Therapy*, and Davis's *Cycles*, she shows how the films create an "intimate public" creating a

spectatorship experience that validates black audiences “sense of themselves, their history, and their experiences.”

Jacqueline Stewart’s “The L.A. Rebellion Plays Itself” discusses how the occasional device of the filmmakers appearing in their own creative work addresses the complexity of the filmmaker’s experience, complicating or extending the “double consciousness” (Dubois) of blacks in contemporary culture with the artist’s creative distance from community and subjects. By its very nature, gaining the skills to make artistic media separates the maker from the community, and this presents issues for the artist, for the “voice” of the media work, for its reception and for its relation to the original community. This richer, deeper, understanding should inform discussion of the L.A. Rebellion from now on. And both Sheppard and Stewart raise important matters for other film movements.

As a whole the anthology provides a masterful survey of a distinct and challenging cultural movement and moment, but it also provides a model for studying and thinking about other collective media events and expressions.

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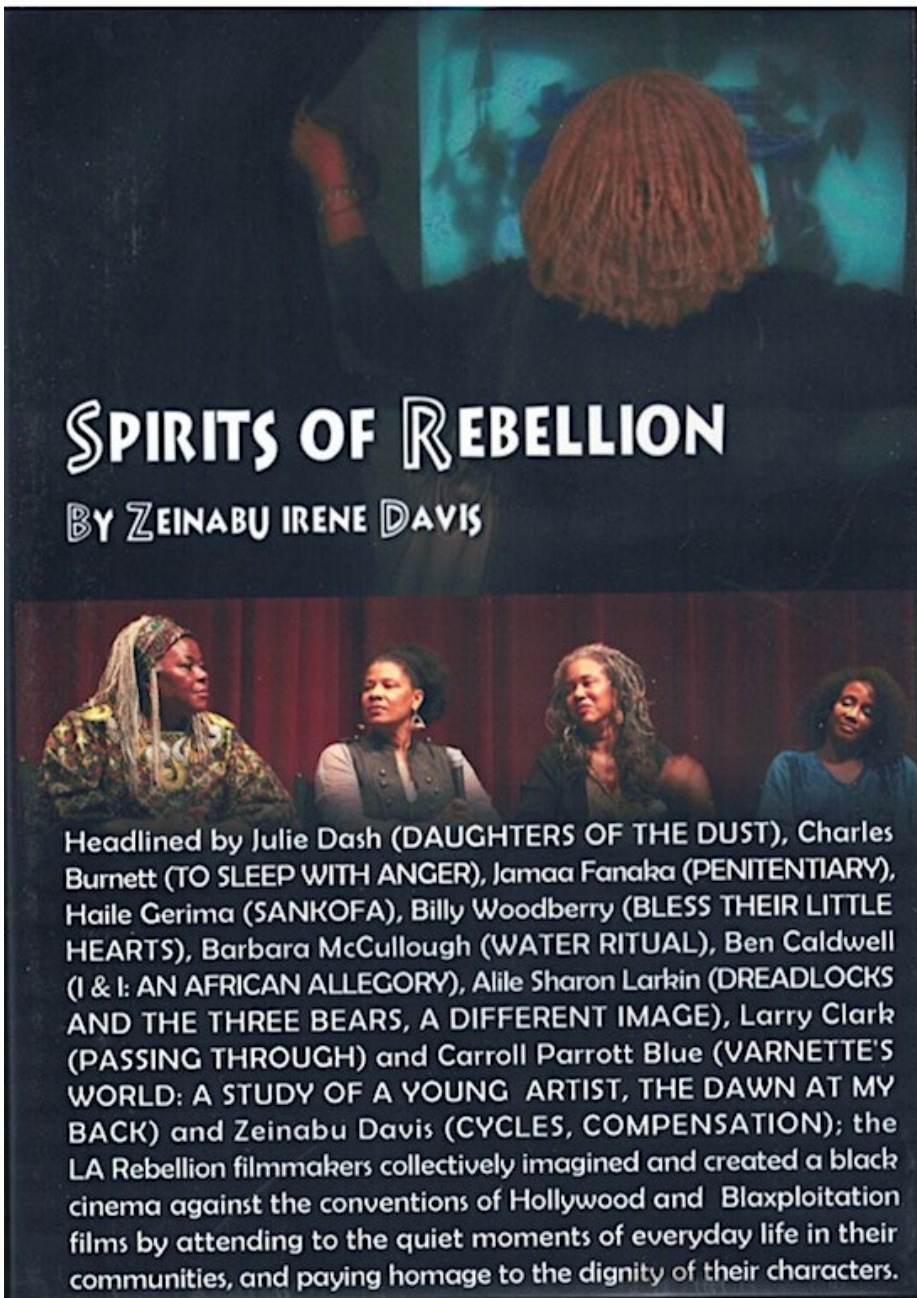
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Meet the rebellion

Zeinabu Irene Davis, *Spirits of Rebellion*, DVD, 101 min., Wimmen with a Mission Productions.



An introduction to and survey of the Los Angeles Rebellion filmmakers by one of its members, *Spirits of Rebellion* sews a rich quilt from film clips, interviews by participants, while looking at both the past origins and achievements and the present status of the veterans. The video is compelling and varied and especially interesting for finding sharp insights often overlooked by others. For example

Larry Clark remarks about the ties he formed with black theatre people in Los Angeles while going to UCLA in film, and Davis herself points to Cauleen Smith, director of *Drysolong* (1998), as carrying on the spirit of the original group even though Smith began her work later than the core group. Similarly, the film reveals the ongoing achievements of figures such as Alile Sharon Larkin, best known for her early short films, who has pioneered working with Afrocentric arts and media in Los Angeles elementary schools, and Bernard Nicholas who reflects on his attempts to distribute work of the LA Rebellion makers. Shirikiana Aina explains how she and Haile Gerima have only been able to make about one feature film every decade or so due to spare resources for these kinds of film, but have sustained Sankofa, a video/book store, cafe, and all-around gathering place for conversation and exchange in Washington DC.

This broader overview helps situate the movement/community as a whole which has often only been referenced by its most celebrated figures such as Haile Gerima, Charles Burnett, and Julie Dash. It also illuminates the close ties to African and third world filmmaking. As one interviewee points out, Ousmane Sembene's first Senegalese films were made just a few years before the UCLA group was forming and screening them and other Third World films. Seeing films made by black people about black people was a wake up and revelation for these aspiring cinema artists. It pushed them to want to make put their own vision and experiences with their communities on record.

Rather than directly feeding into the existing and dominant Hollywood industry, these artists wanted both the expressiveness and control over their work that independence provides. This also involves reorienting one's thinking about what film is and can do. On the one hand, the film argues, the typical critical dismissal of early 70s Blaxploitation films as white appropriation and exploitation of African American culture doesn't address the fact that those films gave jobs to a lot of black actors and were enthusiastically seen, again and again, by black audiences.

As worthy as actions like #OscarsSoWhite are, and as rewarding as it is to see vibrantly imagined work such as *Moonlight* receive an Oscar, the L.A. Rebellion films bent in another direction. Film scholar Jacqueline Stewart observes that early on when showing Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* to a class a student dismissed it as "poor people's home movies." Exactly, the professor explains, the film and others of the movement validate as worthy of attentive regard the lives and environs of ordinary African Americans, something the mainstream film and television marketplace seldom represents, much less represents with understanding, seriousness, and affection. She then explains that ever since, she's always discussed the L.A. films by validating the term "poor people's home movies." (For some years now, Stewart has created and run the Southside Home Movie Project which collects and preserves the rare home mode moving image culture of black Chicago.)

As a whole, *Spirits of Rebellion* captures both the energizing upstart beginning of the Rebellion and the extended and diverse features of its aftermath. It is especially compelling for clips of lesser known work, giving significant consideration to the women involved in the activities, and providing a sense of aesthetic and political diversity in the group. Especially interesting: the vibrant energy formed by a collective imagination and goal of creating a new black cinema. People crewed on each other's projects, learned by doing, started out with self-confident optimism. The spirit of the L.A. Rebellion was radical activism. Taking many different forms besides some notable films, it sustained careers and communities.

[Full disclosure: I have a short interview within the film. Zeinabu Davis is a friend

and was my colleague for some years in Northwestern's Radio/TV/Film department, as was Jacqueline Stewart.]

[Go to page 5 on *Charles Burnett: A Cinema of Symbolic Knowledge* by James Naremore, and *Killer of Sheep* DVD](#)

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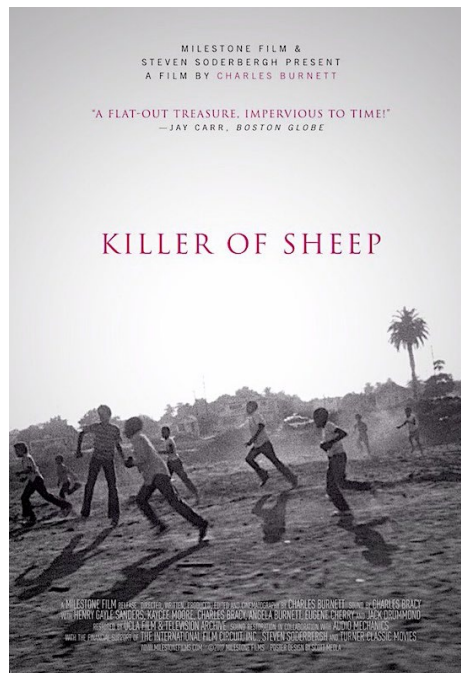
JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Rebellion and authorship

James Naremore, *Charles Burnett: A Cinema of Symbolic Knowledge*
(Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017)

Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (DVD), Milestone Film and Video.



The first book length study of contemporary writer-director Charles Burnett, James Naremore's extensive study of the African American auteur's career to date gives a measured analysis of an under-recognized filmmaker. [Full disclosure: I've known Naremore since the early 1970s, and I've written on some of Burnett's films. I was asked by UC Press to review the initial proposal for the book at which point I urged both publication and expansion of the plan.]

Best known for his early neorealist style drama, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), a landmark contribution to black cinema in the U.S., Burnett has a long and varied career making films for theatrical and television exhibition. The Library of Congress National Film Registry recognized *Killer of Sheep* early on, helping with preservation and making the film more widely available. Burnett's feature *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), a Hollywood allegorical comedy, failed at the box office (many say it was sabotaged) but remains a highly regarded film by critics. In one reading of the body of his creative work, Burnett has sustained a long career with an interesting variety ranging from low budget indie writer-director films to conventional commercial format projects stretching from documentaries to dramatic fictions. Thus while maintaining an active and creative professional presence, another reading of his corpus follows a long pattern of frustration and compromise in actually producing work, underlining the complicated work of maintaining an independent vision rather than assimilating into the commercial

mainstream.

Naremore provides very detailed descriptions of Burnett's body of films. This is especially welcome because they originated and ended up in such different contexts: television, commercial Hollywood, art house cinema, shorts, festival pieces, etc. It's difficult to track them all down, and some have had very limited availability. For example, *The Annihilation of Fish* (1999), a filmed stage-piece, never made it past the initial festival circuit despite having two stars: James Earl Jones and Lynn Redgrave. *The Wedding* (1998), a dramatic version of Harlem Renaissance writer Dorothy West's novel, was produced by Oprah Winfrey as a two-part made-for-television movie starring Hallie Berry. And the actual shoot was produced by Winfrey's team corralling all creative work within a budget-driven TV style that left little room for Burnett's talents. In his excellent book, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (expanded edition, 2008) Naremore validated Burnett's *The Glass Shield* (1994) another project that was limited by studio decisions.

Despite these frustrations, Burnett has continued to be active by consistently pursuing projects that take a serious and respectful stance to African Americans and their experiences. In person Burnett has a soft-spoken and firm presence which is reflected in his work as an artist. He has accomplished much in 40+ years of filmmaking, this book is a welcome recognition of his achievements. And, (ta-dah!) Burnett was just given a Governor's Award (which includes an Oscar statue) from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

DVD

Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (DVD), Milestone Film and Video.

The 2 disc DVD package includes *Killer of Sheep* (1977), an unforgettable classic, two different edits of Burnett's second feature, *My Brother's Wedding*, (the original 1983 version and a 2007 director's cut), and four short films from different moments in his career: *Several Friends* (1969), *The Horse* (1973), *When It Rains* (1995), and *Quiet as Kept* (2007). An outstanding restoration.



Abu Ghraib in art history perspective

review by Chuck Kleinhans

Eisenman, Stephen F.. *The Abu Ghraib Effect*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007. \$19.95 US

A professor of art history at Northwestern, Stephen Eisenman, writes a short, condensed book on the Abu Ghraib which illuminates some of the disturbing power of the images. But he is also concerned with the fact that they are absorbed into the dominant ideology:

“What if the US public and the amateur photographers at Abu Ghraib share a kind of moral blindness—let us call it the ‘Abu Ghraib effect’—that allows them to ignore, or even to justify, however partially or provisionally, the facts of degradation and brutality manifest in the pictures?” (9)

He points at the persistence of a “pathos formula” of passionate suffering in Western classical art ranging from ancient Greece and imperial Rome to work by Raphael, Michelangelo, and Bernini: “the motif of tortured people and tormented animals who appear to sanction their own abuse...” (16) Thus the Abu Ghraib torture photos serve to affirm that the military victors are omnipotent and the prisoners are abject and inhuman, which in turn justifies the power relation, the violence exacted on the defenseless.

Eisenman also points to a counter-tradition which resists the formula in which victims welcome their own torture and death. This direction represented by Hogarth, the anti-slavery movement, David’s *Death of Marat*, Goya, Courbet, Manet, and some modern artists works to show the inhumanity of torture and military murder. “*Guernica* is a work of art whose creator has suspended the oppressive, classical equation of beauty, order and power.” (91) But he also warns that the rise of imperialism and totalitarian regimes in 20C re-invigorated the pathos formula: including mass culture (referring to the requisite torture scenes in James Bond movies and the TV series *24*). For Eisenman, the elaborate staging of scenes and the photos of them at Abu Ghraib (sanctioned by higher authority)

“was not to obtain information from enemy combatants, or even to inflict punishment; it was to shame prisoners and to gratify ...the feelings of national and racial superiority of the soldiers and civilians at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, and to uphold the moral and political necessity of the American military venture in the face of worldwide opposition and condemnation.” (98)

While the book clearly argues Eisenman’s central thesis, its extreme brevity produces problems for deeper analysis. He takes exception to thinkers who

initially linked the photos to pornography (they are not intended to be erotic, he replies) and lynching photos (obscure the purpose of the prison photos and their historical roots). But he sidesteps the nature of the photos as always intentionally showing (a) the prisoners' abject shame and (b) the military's theatricalization of their power, and also revealing (c) their additional and unavoidable documentation of a crime to outside judges. The author could have usefully extended his analysis by considering the considerable critical literature produced by feminists on images of rape and rape threat (e.g., [Julia Lesage's essay on rape threat in cinema](#)). The mixture of power and sexuality has been extensively analyzed by feminists discussing rape and clearly pertains to the prison photos.

Additionally there's a well-established discussion of the history of war photography which vastly broadens the issues. Obviously, depending on who—which side—is viewing them, civilian casualties can be interpreted as regrettable “collateral damage” or “brutality”; battlefield deaths can be read as “heroic sacrifice” or “wasted losses.” And the larger role of media gatekeeping pertains. We know well that images of Iraqi civilian suffering were kept out of the media in the years preceding the second Gulf war, just as horrifying battlefield deaths were erased from the visual record of the first Gulf war.

And the topic begs for elaboration. What was the use and function of WW2 atrocity photos such as the Japanese assault on Nanking civilians? Did the Nazis take photographs in the concentration camps? (Perhaps not, we remember the documentary images of the camps at liberation. What would have been the point of images earlier?). What of the images of Mussolini's body, or collaborators with the losing side at the end of the war? And the famous Vietnam image of a street execution, or self-immolating Buddhist monks, or napalm victims fleeing US attacks?

The Abu Ghraib images have at least a double valance. While Eisenman understandably regrets that they were for the most part ideologically absorbed in the United States, he neglects that they have been read precisely opposite in the rest of the world, particularly the Muslim world. While they appeared after Eisenman finished his book, analytic films such as *Taxi to the Dark Side* and *Standard Operating Procedure* recontextualize the photos in the political direction he seeks. (See [Jump Cut essay on torture documentaries](#).)

Eisenman also plays down one of the explicit purposes of the photos, which was direct humiliation of prisoners whose faces were visible and thus identifiable. They were told that the photos would be shown in their home locales and thus they would never be able to return with any personal or familial dignity. The psychological effect intended to convince the prisoners they had no future and thus should confess and collaborate.

Eisenman's more basic argument seems to be, from his brief “afterward,” a quarrel with the dominant narratives of Western art history, particularly development, progress, and idolization of Europe. But along the way, he falls into thoughtless editorializing that reveals his own elitism. Cleverly, he labels the prison guards as “Right-wing Deleuzians,...desiring-machines stymied in familial, social and economic spheres at home, but let loose in Iraq.” (109)

“[Lynndie] England, a young woman from rural Cumberland, West Virginia, enlists in the Army Reserves in order to quit her job at a chicken processing-plant in Moorhead, a factory singled out by PETA (and filmed) because of its particular cruelty to animals. Sent to Iraq in 2003, she finds there an outlet for her repressed desires: she learns to torture and kill, and pairs up with Graner [the ringleader and instigator of the photos].” (109-10)

How precisely does Eisenman know England's "repressed desires"? One could, based on the Wikipedia entry for England (which seems like the apparent source for Eisenman's speculation) also note that she joined the Reserves to get money for college, and that given the charges she faced and her defense and interviews she gave before and after her court martial, that she was directed by others, particularly her boyfriend Graner, to appear in the pictures, and that she was reluctant but "didn't want to lose him." That's a somewhat different motivation than Eisenman's rearticulation of Adorno's Authoritarian Personality, one quite well thought-through by feminists. *The Abu Gharib Effect* makes an interesting start on analysis of the prison photos, but there's much more to be said.

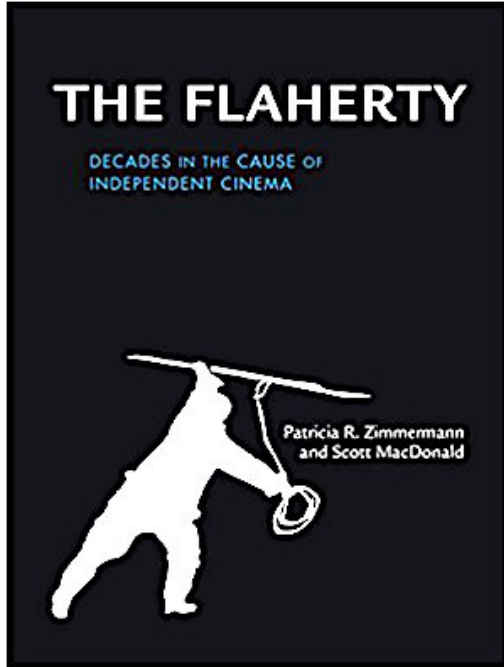
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Zimmerman writes, "The logo of the lone hunter stood as a metaphor for the continuing auteurist orientation of seminar programming."



Louisiana Story (1948), dir. Robert Flaherty

The story of the Flaherty Seminar

review by [Bill Stamets](#)

Patricia R. Zimmermann and Scott MacDonald, *The Flaherty: Decades in the Cause of Independent Cinema*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2017.

The Flaherty: Decades in the Cause of Independent Cinema traces an institutional and intellectual history of the Flaherty Seminar, a storied enclave for discoursing cineastes. Yearly gatherings, typically in upstate New York, devote several intense days and nights to screenings and discussions. Longtime participants Patricia R. Zimmermann and Scott MacDonald craft a loyal insiders' reading that alloys scholarly documentation with allegiance to Robert and Frances Flaherty's humanist agenda. Both authors have served as programmers.

Robert Flaherty—best known for his 1922 film *Nanook of the North*—died in 1951. The following year Frances Flaherty—his wife and key collaborator—attended the International Edinburgh Festival. She later traveled to Chicago for the American Film Assembly, where the Film Society Caucus listed the one-time suffragette society secretary as Mrs. Robert J. Flaherty. Frances and Robert's brother David initially launched The Flaherty Foundation to circulate Robert's oeuvre.

Promulgating her own vision of alternative, artisanal cinema antithetical to Hollywood arose as a parallel mission for Frances Flaherty, who articulated a sort of ciné-ethos of unscripted "nonpreconception." Serendipity and epiphany were touchstones. "You are a means to let the camera act," she instructed filmmakers in a 1952 article titled "The Flaherty Way" in *The Saturday Review*. "What you have to do is to let go, let go of every thought of your own, wipe your mind clean, fresh, innocent, newborn, become as sensitive as unexposed film in order to take up the impressions around you, and then let what will, come in," she stated at the 1963 seminar.

"The Robert Flaherty Film Seminar is one of the oldest, continuously functioning organizations in the world dedicated to an exploration of independent cinema," writes Zimmermann. "It began in 1955 on the Flaherty farm in Vermont at the height of the civil rights movement, the Cold War, the Eisenhower era, and the Red Scare as a place to think through cinema as an art form rather than as a business." She notes that was the same year Edward Steichen's "Family of Man" photography exhibition opened at Museum of Modern Art.

The Flaherty: Decades in the Cause of Independent Cinema thoroughly details aesthetic debates and cultural politics of The Flaherty (in the shorthand of devotees) as well as the organizational trajectory of the nonprofit group that manages it. Covering seven decades, this 341-page book is preceded by the very similarly titled "The Flaherty: Four Decades in the Cause of Independent Film," a 465-page special volume of the journal *Wide Angle: A Quarterly Journal of Film History, Theory, Criticism, and Practice*. For the 40th anniversary of the Flaherty

Seminars in 1995, co-editors Erik Barnouw and Patricia R. Zimmermann enlisted 20 writers. Zimmerman, a film prof at Ithaca College, and MacDonald, then at Utica College and now at Hamilton College, contributed pieces too.

“Barnouw argued,” Zimmermann recalls, “the Flaherty Seminars deserved a scholarly book so its history could be recovered, analyzed, taught, and argued about.” She also points out that Frances Flaherty—the subject of her first chapter —“criticized virtually every book written about Robert Flaherty.”

In between Zimmerman’s decade-by-decade chapters (writing “turning point” at five junctures), MacDonald places interludes sampling verbal exchanges between filmmakers, moderators and mostly anonymous attendees. MacDonald names himself and Zimmerman on the handful of occasions their own words are transcribed. Whenever their roles enter Zimmerman’s narrative, each is identified in a third-person voice. The co-authors affect no vantage as ethnographers of “its clique-ish and almost cultish mentality,” notwithstanding the seminar’s original sympathy for personal ethnographic filmmaking.

MacDonald brings a longstanding regard for independent filmmakers and film groups. He compiled dossiers of documents about the Art in Cinema and Cinema 16 film societies, and the alternative film distributor Canyon Cinema launched in 1946, 1947 and 1967, respectively. In the third of his five book series, “A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers,” he excerpted five Flaherty discussions. MacDonald explains his method:

“I have transcribed the discussions very carefully but then have treated each transcription as raw material from which to fabricate a ‘reading’ of the original discussion... while doing my best to remain true to what has seemed to me the spirit and idea content of the discussion.”

Wording and word choices recur as a theme. Zimmermann writes of David Flaherty calling attendees “participants” rather than “students.” “Film maker” was used in the seminar’s early years, not “filmmaker.” At the 1994 seminar Filipino director Nick Deocampo reflected:

“During the time of Marcos, there was heavy censorship, so we had to go underground. That term appealed to us, more than ‘experimental,’ more than ‘independent,’ more than ‘abstract.’ We identified with ‘underground’ because we really were running from authority.”

After screening his film about Adolf Eichmann, Israeli director Eyal pushed back against an adjective he kept hearing at 2013’s seminar: “There is nothing brave about what I do; it’s hard work, that’s all. The word brave shouldn’t be banalized; not everything is brave.”

As self-conscious and self-critical as its subject, The Flaherty sports the expressions “metadrama,” “metastrategy,” “metaexperience of cinema” and “ongoing metadiscourse about what reality-based cinema has been, can be, and should be.” Intellectually, the transcripts are inspired. After screening his radically reflexive *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, William Greaves brought up the Heisenberg Principle of Uncertainty and the Second Law of Thermodynamics. In 1994 projectionist Michael Grillo engaged Indian director Mani Kaul:

“I’d like to ask about the innate cultural implications of basically a Western technology: cinema. I don’t mean simply the traditional history of cinema but rather its language: the optical system inherited from the Italian Renaissance and the narrative system based on nineteenth-century English and French novels. Given your cultural background and the nature of what you are making, where do you run

up against the limitations of these culturally loaded technologies? And how do you resist them?”

Films and filmmakers alike were “interrogated,” to deploy a risibly militant term of art among humanities profs. Michael Snow, though, was at a loss for words when asked: “Philosophically, does it [*Wavelength*] say anything about the universe, or time, or the human condition?” The Canadian artist could not say much more than: “I do think that it says certain things and is concerned with certain things.” More pragmatic inquiries concerned production details, like Barbara Kopple’s 357 Magnum when shooting *Harlan County USA*: “[W]e carried weapons—only at night. We didn’t want to be caught with weapons during the day since that would give them an excuse to kill us.”



Credit: <http://lef-foundation.org/NewEngland/Blog/tabid/193/EntryId/123/LEF-New-England-Fellow-Allison-Cekala-on-the-2017-Flaherty-Seminar.aspx>

Frederick Wiseman brought *Titicut Follies* in 1967 prior to its first public screening in New York City. He perplexed some at the seminar: “But what use will you make of it in Massachusetts?” Wiseman: “It’ll be shown to whoever has a dollar and a half.” MacDonald transcribes what followed: “Why are everyone’s questions so hostile? [Many voices talking at once].”

A selection of objections from various years: “Now, can anybody tell us what we’re missing? I mean this as an open question, not as an accusation.” ... “but for me it was just this male gaze thing for two hours. And that’s something we have to live with every day!” ... “I’m not being mean when I say this, just brutally real—please understand that. I liken your film to radical surgery with a rusty knife without anesthesia.”

Trinh T. Minh-ha screened her unsubtitled *Reassemblage* in 1983. “I wanted to alleviate the tyranny of the camera,” she submitted. “I don’t want to control how you understand the film.” An audience member did not buy it: “No, no, that won’t work.” Three years later Victor Masayesva projected his Hopi video “without subtitles to assert the dominance of indigenous language.”

The Flaherty: Decades in the Cause of Independent Cinema contains no still frames from works screened at the seminar. There are nine photos, group shots

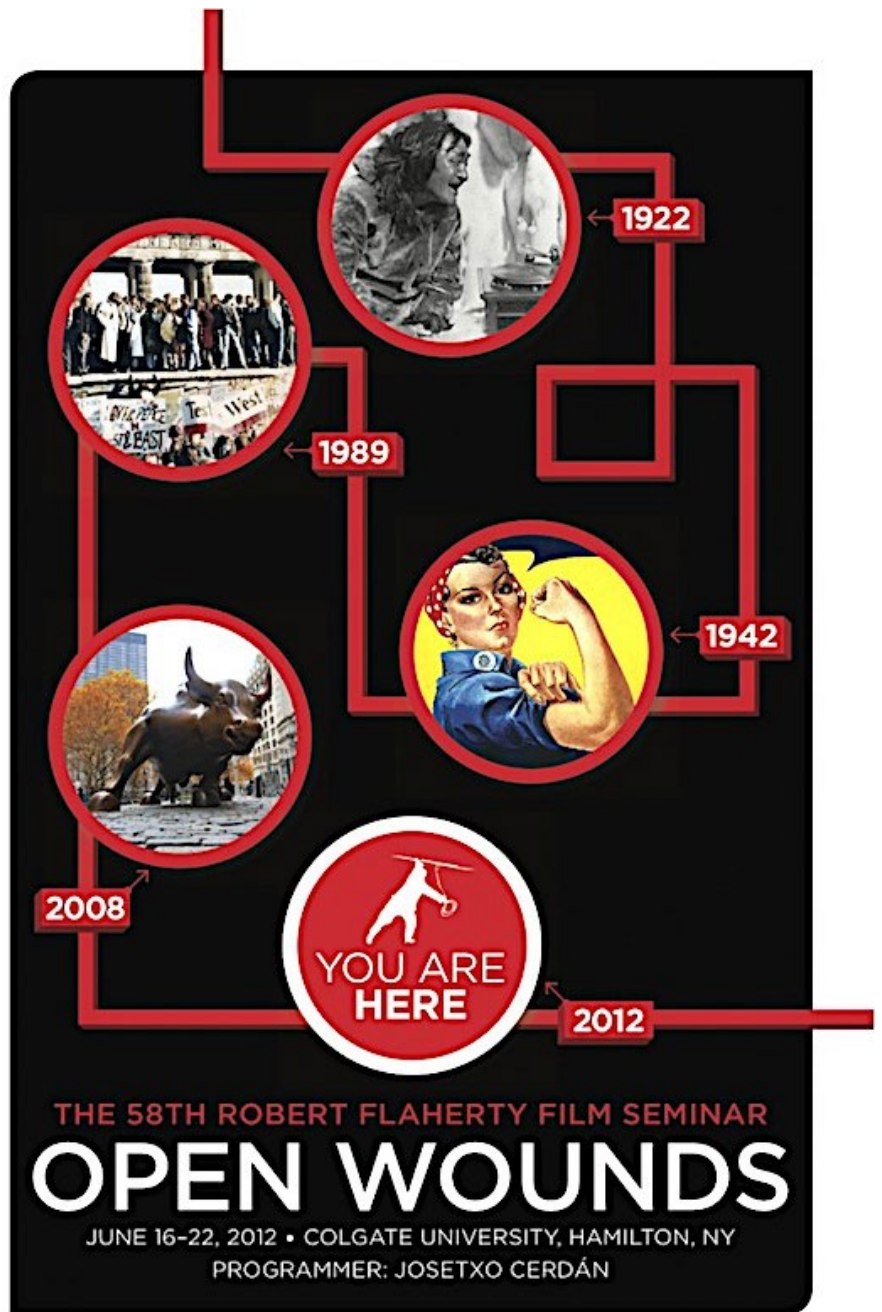
from various years, that are unanalyzed. Zimmermann, however, subjects a new Flaherty icon to a close reading. “By 2000,” she writes, Flaherty’s

“logo of the lone hunter stood as a metaphor for the continuing auteurist orientation of seminar programming... With the background removed, the image evoked the seminar’s isolation, a week-long retreat from daily life with the outside shut out. As Nanook hunted fox, seal, and walrus, seminar participants hunted documentary, experimental, fiction, and hybrid forms, spearing works that inspired or broke new ground.”

Zimmermann’s ekphrasis appears in her last chapter, titled “The Brand, 2000–2015.” Here she diligently chronicles the professionalization of the board and staff of International Film Seminars. President Patti Bruck (2002–2009) in particular gets credit for her efforts. Zimmermann—serving as vice-president (1990–1993) with two stints as a trustee (1989–1994)—could be seen as practicing Action Anthropology on behalf of Flaherty natives and their way of life, life of the mind, and love of film. Potential funders of this nonprofit will find the equivalent of an on-site assessment of a worthy cultural institution. Historians and sociologists of arts organizations, however, may be surprised to see no numbers about Flaherty budgets.

“The Flaherty brand” has evolved, Zimmermann observes: “From 2001 to 2015, seminar programming increasingly dismantled the binaries of commercial versus independent and documentary versus avant-garde. It shifted toward more polyversal, transnational media practices.” She concludes: “Most everyone seems to disagree about what ‘the Flaherty’ was, is, or should be. And these debates, for which there are no easy resolutions, are, in the end, most likely what keeps ‘the Flaherty’ pulsing with life, thriving.”

MacDonald impishly punctuates his contribution by quoting a discursive filmmaker in 2016: “I grew up in the fifties, when the films of the great European and American directors—Buñuel, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Billy Wilder, Bergman, Dreyer... Am I talking too much?” The moderator kindly answers: “No, no, but we do have to wrap things up and move on.”



From The Flaherty website

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Chuck Kleinhans 1942-2017: a personal memoir and a tribute

by [Thomas Waugh](#)

Jump Cut co-founder/co-editor-publisher Chuck Kleinhans, one of the most influential film scholars and activists of the era of the New Left and onwards, died suddenly of heart failure on December 14 in Eugene Oregon. The 43 year-old magazine, in print since 1974 and online since 2001, will continue to address “contemporary media” with all its well-known commitment, passion and astute analytic vision.



Chuck Kleinhans and Tom Waugh at an early Visible Evidence documentary film conference.



Northwestern University, Radio-Television-Film

Generations of film scholars, historians, activists and critics lost a devoted mentor and astute reader-editor. Chuck was Associate Professor Emeritus in the Radio/Television/Film Department, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, where he served from 1977 to 2009. The courses he taught over those decades say much: introductory courses in microcomputer graphics, film and video making, media literacy, popular culture; advanced courses in production aesthetics, experimental and documentary film and video, Hollywood cinema; and graduate courses in film/tv theory, mass culture theory, digital culture, cross-cultural media. Forty-three Northwestern doctoral graduates' debt to him is immeasurable.

A connoisseur of documentary and the avant-garde and sexual representation and everything in between, local and global, Chuck was a legendary piercer of bullshit



Jump Cut co-founders and co-editors, John Hess and Chuck Kleinhaus.



Young self-portrait.



Young self-portrait.

and complacency in academia and on the left and everywhere else, a brilliant identifier of the exact political and artistic issues at stake in every film and piece of film scholarship.

Thousands of film scholars of my generation and younger have their Chuck memories, and I'm sure everyone sees theirs as symbolic of Chuck's legacy as I do mine. If I share several of mine in this tribute, I hope this personal memoir of a friend will speak for much of what Chuck achieved and what he meant to so many others. Every eulogy is a record of a relationship, but to balance my personal indulgence I also incorporate some very very long excerpts from Chuck's own writing, swelling up to occupying a full half of this text, simply in the spirit of allowing his inimitable and unforgettable voice to be the ultimate presiding presence herein. This is not meant to serve as the definitive "best of," but hopefully as the first of many best-ofs (all the more since two of the Kleinhaus articles I excerpt are not available online).

I had discovered *Jump Cut* by accident the summer I was working in the library periodicals section of the mediocre Ivy League university where I was doing my graduate degrees in film studies and itching for an elusive Marxist methodology for my new discipline. This was 1974 and Shirley Temple was on the cover of the new newsprint tabloid rag that flopped onto my desk: inside was an astute analysis of class in Hollywood cinemas. I was converted immediately! This was exactly what was missing in my program that was entirely shaped by an apolitical fixation on auteur and art cinemas, and I became JC's number one fan.

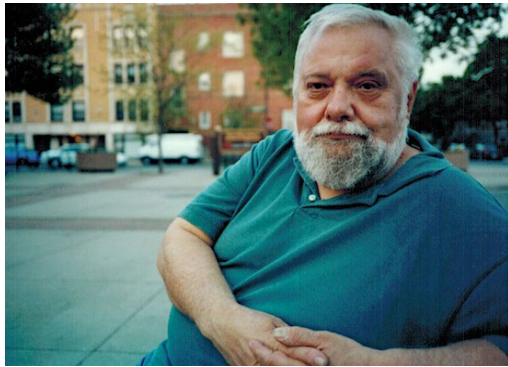
The honeymoon was jarred a few issues later however. I had been inching my way out of the closet and wondering what a materialist gay film studies would look like when suddenly I saw JC 4's headline for its ideological critique of Clint Eastwood/Michael Cimino's latest homosocial romance *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*: "Tightass and Cocksucker." Excuse me? I fired off a snailmail (that was all we had in 1974) to *Jump Cut* not so gently asking where a straight lefty mag got off using ambiguous if not homophobic epithets as a header for a fagbaiting article on a male-bonding genre flic that itself had a few too many ambiguities for its own good (I couldn't tell which was worse the film or the article).[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Chuck had not been born yesterday and sniffed fresh meat: in his semi-apologetic response he unapologetically recruited me to write for the magazine. What followed was my first ever scholarly publication, a recycled term paper on Emile de Antonio, and more importantly in 1977 "Who Are We? A Very Natural Thing, *The Naked Civil Servant*: Films by Gays for Gays."

The latter not only blew my cover after one year in my new tenure-track job but also raised important issues about the relationship of the gay left and straight left. Chuck (and Julia and third co-editor John Hess) supported and welcomed the new writer and more importantly the magazine's solidarity with the politics of sexuality and sexual minority cultural activism. I have often described Chuck and Julia's role in my work as semi-mentorship, although they were only slightly older than me, and that's when it all started: I had never experienced solidarity on the part of straight leftists—not to mention straight feminists—and the lessons about solidarity, about what later would be called intersectionality, and about criticism and self-criticism on the left came fast and furious.

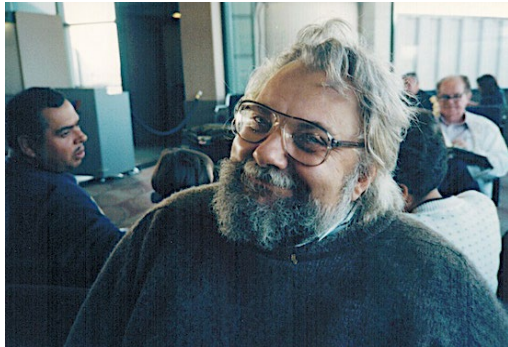
My second anecdote comes a few years later, just after I had defended my PhD on serial heterosexual communist documentarist Joris Ivens, snagged tenure and was looking for a new research direction, hopefully enlisting the new momentum in gay and lesbian film studies. Chuck had done his PhD at Indiana University and was familiar with the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, periodically dropping in on research visits. I don't remember which came first but he shared with me two amazing discoveries: a hoard of vintage



Self-portrait.



Longtime Chicago resident, from childhood on.



Chicago years.

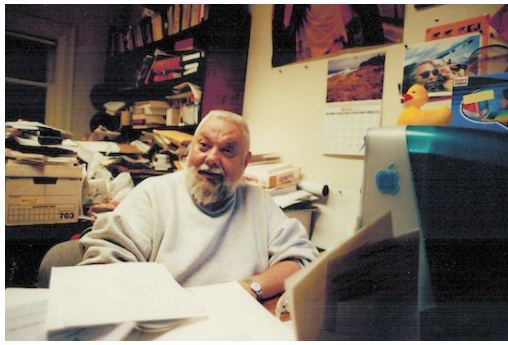
black-and-white hetero shoe-fetish cheesecake photos, and a 16mm silent short fiction film from the mid-fifties narrating a male-male love story in New Jersey and Manhattan, beautifully shot in black and white. The latter was anonymous but somehow we soon figured out it was by the Oscar-winning French documentarist François Reichenbach, who had obviously networked with the American gay underground and Dr. Kinsey on his filmmaking excursions to the U.S. before the latter's death in 1956. These finds were clearly the tip of the iceberg, and Chuck did not even have to tell me to get my ass down to Kinsey for I had quickly got a grant and was already halfway there.... I guess ultimately I have Chuck to thank for the major new thrust of my career, explorations of sexual representation and pornography, their histories and politics.

It was the heady summer of 1982, the year of the Barnard Conference on sexuality and feminism, the paradigm-shifting "Sex Issue" of the "bad girl" feminist rag *Heresies*, and as if in rebuttal the "good girl" Canadian documentary *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography*. Meanwhile my friends and editors at the Toronto community magazine *Body Politic* were still on trial for obscenity. The porn wars were thus upon us and the ten-years-old *Jump Cut* was well positioned to take the plunge, the only film magazine to figure it out instantly, to talk with complexity, toughness and solidarity about the proliferating culture of the sexual revolution as it was lurching towards the digital era. I still use Chuck and Julia's editorial on sexual representation from the pioneering 1985 special issue on porn in my teaching more than thirty years later and here is a rather large taste:

... critiques of visual pornography too often rest on a naive and misleading understanding of the photographic/ electronic image. Too often the critique of sexual imagery assumes that such images simply and directly reproduce reality. Yet the major theoretical and practical development of image analysis in the past two decades has undermined the notion that an unmediated reality can be simply duplicated by image technology. Rather, realism itself is highly conventional, as are the ways that people understand images; i.e., such an understanding is highly socially constructed. Certainly images utilize imitation. But the nature of reproduction, media of reproduction, is such that reality — the tangible and social world as it exists — comes to us only via the media, which have a primary artificial and thus cultural nature. That's what's implied in the very word "image." We will find no simple "negative image" of women, nor any simple and universal "positive" one. Images are always understood in context and through the filter of the receiver's consciousness.

...Most crucially, in the debates around pornography, distinctions are often made between a good and acceptable "erotica" and an evil and pernicious "pornography," yet such distinctions rest on the assumption that an image would have an inherent meaning. On closer inspection, this too is "interpretation," and it rests on a culturally and subjectively developed sense of good taste and aesthetic or moral education. Projections about distinctions between erotica and pornography are often put forth with no awareness at all of the ethnocentric, class, and race bias that they exhibit.

....Another major problem occurs when critiques of pornography do not distinguish between the realm of fiction, fantasy, and imagination, on the one hand, and the fact of representation, on the other. In this, the feminist critique tends to echo the right wing in the opposition to porn—that showing sexuality is itself the problem. While anti-porn feminists may allow for some sexually explicit material, their analysis is often strongly normative. Politically correct sexuality can be shown, but certain behaviors and minority tastes are definitely beyond the acceptable. Robin Morgan has gone so far as to argue that not only can women



Office at Northwestern.



Early days in Chicago.

change their basic fantasy structures by an act of will, but that they are obligated to do so to remain feminists: if fantasies are reactionary, change them. While it may well be that some women (and men) can and do change their basic sexual fantasies, it has yet to be shown how the vast majority of people can do so.

The deep power of much art, from fictional narration to visual representation, in print and in performance and on the screen, lies precisely in connecting with subconscious patterns of feeling and thinking. People initially form these patterns in infancy and childhood, and however much they later modify and transform their personality, most subconscious patterns are not completely transcended. Thus people commonly find pleasure in what they themselves may regard as politically incorrect fantasies. But this is part of the nature of fantasy and the artistic use of it. Fantasy is precisely what people desire but do not necessarily want to act on. It is an imaginative substitution and not necessarily a model for overt behavior. Morgan's famous slogan, 'Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice,' assumes a cause and effect relation which is speculative at best. Yes, some rapists use pornography (which alone doesn't prove cause), but not all men (and certainly not the majority) who use pornography become rapists. The slogan implies a strategy: eliminate pornography and you will eliminate rape. Yet that strategy seems to substitute attacking the symptom for confronting the problem.

The evolution of the feminist anti-pornography movement has been to seek state censorship. Earlier protests used direct action, such as vandalizing objectionable billboards, informational leafleting, and picketing specific films. As women have turned to a strategy of pressuring for local censorship ordinances, they have been willing in some cases to form alliances with the right, such as the Moral Majority in Indianapolis. In doing so, the feminist anti-porn movement seems to have lost an understanding of how and why censorship has been used by the right, and also by the capitalist state. It seems increasingly to support a very narrow view of acceptable sexuality and acceptable representations of sexuality in imaginative forms. And it seems deeply confused about the actual history of sexual representation and censorship.[2]

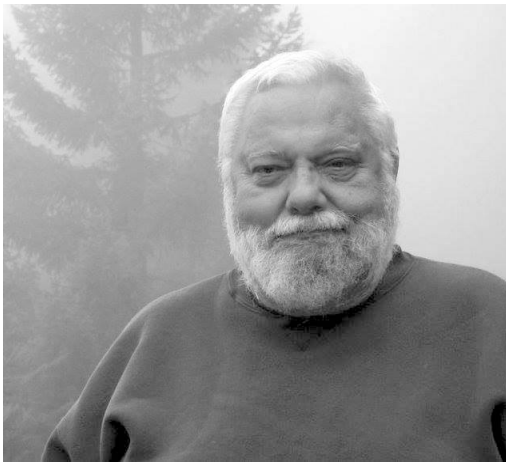
I suspect Julia remembers which turn of phrase or idea came from which co-writer, but I for the life of me can't separate the two voices: this is collaborative writing at its most productive, most insightful and most seamless... and most political!



Comrade lovers.

Meanwhile I had not abandoned my commitment to committed documentary, and I strong-armed Chuck, Julia and John to all contribute individual chapters to my 1984 anthology *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. All three pieces were core to the volume and have aged extremely well. Chuck's title says it all: "Forms, Politics, Makers and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary." I had never before encountered such tough talk and lucid truth-telling:

Radical documentary in all its media—still and moving image, audio, verbal and written, etc.—has always had at least two basic inescapable functions. Some examples and documentary genres almost exclusively use these two functions: witnessing and affecting. To witness is to say this happened, look at this—this was a concentration camp, these people are demonstrating for their rights, this is what napalm does to children, these are American cluster bombs being used against noncombatant civilians, etc. Given the overt censorships, the covert self-censorship, and the deliberate lies propagated by the dominant order, clearly the simple use of images as witness is itself often radical. To affect is to move: let this



Life in Oregon.



Oregon woods.



Oregon woods.

touch you, let this shock you or surprise you, make you weep or scream with anger, let this affect your heart, your emotions, your unconsciousness, your body, let this move you to act, to resist, and to change. This is always the other function of documentary, even when presented in a deliberate cool or rational style....

Usually, makers and producers justify [their “realist” “formalism”] by saying you have to use familiar forms to reach a large audience and that more experimental forms cannot be used because people do not understand them. It’s a Lawrence Welk approach that ignores the actual nature of visual literacy in our Atari culture. A four-year-old with access to television comes to symbolic consciousness both visually and verbally while immersed in complex image/sound combinations; the child does so while watching commercials as well as many of the animated and documentary segments of children’s shows. To make films that will reach people “where they are at,” in media culture now means to use familiar forms such as rapid montage editing, nontraditional cutting, layered sound and images, and metaphoric and symbolic images. For better or worse, Music Television represents the audio-visual norms of most adolescents today....

The standards for a good radical film and video documentary should be the same as those for good political journalism. This includes a thorough investigation, an understanding of the history and development of the matter being documented, and an honesty in presenting the living complexity of the situation and its politics. Clearly, the standards for a short agitational film or tape made to provoke discussion, emphasize an issue, or move people to a specific decision or action will be different than those for a long analytic work. Yet often extended radical works present simplistic and sanitized versions of their subject. For example, the popular “oral history” interview films—*Union Maids*, *With Babies and Banners*, and *Rosie the Riveter*—erase their interviewees’ connections with and sometimes actual membership in the Communist Party and other organizations. By reproducing anti-communist ideology, such works easily become co-opted, and their widespread use makes it that much harder to get audiences to remember facts that even conservative mainstream historians acknowledge—for example, that the initial CIO organizing drive was led by Communist organizers....

People often forget that the oppositional movement and its politics largely respond to the configuration of the dominant order and that as the established system changes, so will the resistance to it. Since World War II, the distinctive feature of successful radical movements has been their ability to link different kinds and aspects of oppression. This linking has come neither easily nor automatically, of course, but taking a long view of it, we can see a distinct difference between the Old Left’s raising of class issues, defined in fairly strictly conceived economic terms, and a still evolving contemporary radicalism which stresses the fundamental interrelation of class, race, and gender oppression within the context of an anti-imperialist consciousness and an insistence on social and cultural issues as well as economic ones. In fact, the most lively and effective left politics of our time emerges from coalitions which represent a range of interlocking concerns. In this context the substance and style of radical documentary must change to become more capable of working within a changing



With sister Christine and brother Jim.

and evolving coalition. And makers, as well, need to be more flexible and able to work in a variety of ways, to fit different situations and possibilities.[3]

Chuck was not averse to using firsthand knowledge and a personal anecdote to shore up his principled critique of *The War at Home* (Barry Brown and Glenn Silber, 1979), a documentary about campus uprisings in University of Wisconsin Madison (his alma mater) which he reproached for its simplistic present-centred concept of left community history and strategies:

The film signals such an attitude, with 1963 newsreel footage depicting Madison as “the All-American town.” This setup makes the ensuing demonstration seem even more dramatic—protest just springing up like mushrooms after a shower. But even in this opening detail lies a major distortion. The state of Wisconsin has a long tradition of populism and founded the Progressive movement; industrial Milwaukee had socialist majors for most of the 20th century; Madison was a haven for radicals of all stripes during the McCarthy period; and the campus was a favorite of East Coast red diaper babies. In the late ‘50s and ‘60s a progressive campus ministry supported eating cooperatives, free university courses on social issues, avant-garde theatre, civil rights activism, and anti-nuke protest. (I speak from personal experience. As an undergrad at UW from ‘60-‘64, I met ministers who had worked in San Francisco’s gay community and been on civil rights demonstrations in the South, academics who had traveled to post-revolutionary Cuba, Old Leftists’ children who had visited the USSR and took supplies to striking miners in Harlan County, grad students putting out the early New Left intellectual journal *Studies on the Left* and SNCC organizers fundraising for voter registration drives.)

When writing about a Chicago friend and comrade’s work, Chuck dares to use words that were not exactly in the *Screen* lexicon, most importantly “love:”



Julia and JoAnn Elam.

Similarly, JoAnn Elam's *Everyday People* (in progress) portrays the work of letter carriers. The film constantly pivots around what workers find interesting, important, and rewarding about the job, and how management tries to control the worker. The soundtrack uses interviews, pop music hits, and a voice-over narrator explaining the official policy. The visual track consists of hand-held documentary footage of postal work, often edited in-camera with a rapid montage. The total effect is to provide an analysis which doubtlessly provides the best film documentary example of Harry Braverman's contemporary Marxist classic, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. This analysis is framed within a context of frequent humor and obvious love for the job and for the letter carriers depicted.

Thirty years later I recruited Chuck again for a chapter in *Perils of Pedagogy*, the



Images from *Postcards from Nicaragua*, a 1984 52-min. compilation video of works shot by Chuck Kleinhans in Nicaragua, where he and Julia Lesage taught video to Sandinista labor union videomakers. This tape can be seen on [Vimeo](#) or [Mediaburn](#).

volume that I co-edited with Canadian colleagues Brenda Longfellow and Scott MacKenzie on John Greyson, the Canadian filmmaker whom Chuck had got to know as a *JC* contributor in 1984. Writing on two early Greyson works, solidarity documentaries respectively on the Sandinista revolution and Ontario farmworkers' struggles to unionize, Chuck delivered with a familiar truth-telling panache that had only enriched with the years:

A single shot [from Greyson's Nicaragua-solidarity doc *Manzana par Manzana* can stand for a persistent problem. In one long shot a woman is shown washing clothes by hand and on a stone washboard next to a well. She is observed and looks back with an impassive regard, knowing she is being recorded, but there's no acknowledgment. The shot seems to imply that she wasn't spoken with in advance to set up the shot (certainly it could have been a much closer shot if agreement had been reached). She is observed from the outside, and a relation to the camera/cameraperson/viewer has not been established. As a result, we see a woman washing clothes by hand in a technically simple process. What the viewer can conclude, especially one from the cosmopolitan core, is that the woman's life is primitive and poor. A shot from the same sequence appears later in the film, with the addition of a man hauling water up from the well. What could have been suggested is this: a validation of the woman's domestic labour and her skill in washing (few gringos could wash even adequately that way—I speak from personal experience), or an examination of the issue of available, potable, running water. She probably can't wash at home, since there isn't running water available, so she either has to carry it there (and probably does for cooking) or in this case to come to the solitary water supply, the common well, wash the clothes, and carry them back home to dry. In other words, contained in this one shot of this one gesture is a whole material story of infrastructure development, of daily domestic labour, of the tourist's relation to the local resident, of what is at base, a power relationship.[4]

Aside from the amusing image sparked by this account of a large pony-tailed gringo scrubbing his jeans on a stone slab, Chuck was an articulate and comprehensive pedagogue, activist, historian and critic all rolled into one!

This was not Chuck's only gesture of solidarity towards Canada. Once when I had translated and edited a fine piece on Quebec documentary for publication, he had had to fight off a couple of California editorial board members who deemed the subject a little too esoteric for *Jump Cut* readers.[5] A great friend of film scholars, makers and activists from Canada (and those from many other "minor cinemas,"), Chuck and *Jump Cut* published us all, from Greyson himself and Sara Halprin in the early days to my 21st-century doctoral students Evangelos Tziallas and Catherine Bernier who experienced their first major editing experience and reached their first audience through the orange site.

Chuck never got around to publishing a monograph, too busy facilitating, contributing to and critiquing everyone else's work (Is this the reason he retired from Northwestern as *Associate Prof*?) Yet his impact exceeds that of a dozen monographs within the academic publishing industrial complex. Everyone who cares about film, politics, social transformation and the role of the public intellectual, will support Chuck's comrade, partner, love of his life, and co-visionary-founder/co-editor-publisher, Julia Lesage, as she maintains and extends his legacy in this issue and those to come.



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Notes

1. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JCo4folder/ThboltAndLtfoot.html> [return to text]
2. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC3ofolder/PoliticsSexRep.html>
3. “Forms, Politics, Makers and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary.” In Thomas Waugh, ed., *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1984. 318-342.
4. “Solidarity in Motion: *Manzana par Manzana* and *To Pick Is Not to Choose*.” In *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*. Edited by Thomas Waugh, Brenda Longfellow and Scott Mackenzie. Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013. 43-57.
5. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC22folder/QuebecFilm.html>



For Chuck Kleinhans— some thoughts on living in the Anthropocene

by [Jyotsna Kapur](#)

As I helped Julia tidy up Chuck's study after he was gone, she mentioned that Chuck had felt some degree of urgency to get deeper into the concept of the Anthropocene. Chuck's study at his home in Eugene, Oregon with his life partner, Julia Lesage, is stuffed with papers and books piled up on the floor and in shelves; notes scribbled on all kinds of pieces of paper (including on the backs of grocery lists and receipts); photos, cards, tapes and DVDs in boxes; and loads of curiosities from his travels and gifts from students and friends. These things run the whole gamut from the naughty, tacky, and odd to the beautiful. For instance, a rubbery slithery fish-head that acts as a pen holder sits next to a delicately painted China box, staring at it forever. Chuck loved playful juxtapositions and revealing their interconnections, despite their apparent differences. He thrived in opening up possibilities rather than closing meanings. The fish and the box, I realize, are both made in China; both are products of someone's labor; and Julia tells me that Chuck had picked them on his travels, so they must have some personal memory for him.



As I am trying to write this “Last Word” for *Jump Cut*, an editorial that Chuck used to write with Julia, I have to admit—I just don't want to do it. It means accepting that Chuck is not here; that we have lost this large-hearted, astute, and irreverent man, who took such pleasure in destroying our assumptions, but never

our right to hold them. It was one of the reasons people were drawn to Chuck, despite knowing that he would be a tough critic. I can imagine him even now, impatiently urging me to get to the point and I hope that somewhere along this note, I will be able to get to some reflections on the Anthropocene and relate them to Chuck's work.

Chuck's desk in the middle of his study is lit with natural sunlight from windows that line its three walls. From his desk, you can see his favorite rose bushes in the backyard that he tended to and loved to show off to visitors. Julia says that Chuck had a deep affinity with bears and she could imagine him burrowing himself in all that paper, in that cave of a study. I suddenly had this memory of swimming in the pool at Northwestern with my very young children when Chuck showed up. As he proceeded to float on his back, my daughter, all of six years old then and obsessed with *The Jungle Book*, pointed him to us, "there's Baloo!" As I was to learn, Chuck enjoyed children and children's culture immensely—seeing in children's play a joyful reversal of capitalist consumer ideology. He had told me that as kids, he and his friends had subverted the jingle, "You can tell its Mattel, It is swell" to "You can tell its Mattel, It smells." I believe, he ended at least one tedious faculty meeting by shouting out, "Jumanji!" As is typical of Eugene winters, days are mostly cloudy and Julia tells me we should grab the short bursts of sun when they appear and go for a walk. We go to a winding and lush park close to where they live and Julia stops often to look at and point to—a particular light reflecting through the drops on leaves, children stomping in the mud, two women on a walk with dogs who seem to be leading them....

The term Anthropocene refers to a new geological era in which human impact has altered the earth's make-up and created conditions that may well make humanity unsustainable. As Ian Angus (2015) clarifies, it is not only that the human impact on the environment has exponentially expanded, but that human intervention has now come to govern the geological evolution of the planet. He elaborates,

"What we face is not just extensive pollution, not just rising temperatures, not just rising sea levels, but many centuries in which a safe operating space for humanity may no longer exist. That is why, in our time, understanding and responding to the Anthropocene must be at the top of the socialist agenda."

Capitalism, however, can only think of making profits in the shortest time possible. Bourgeois economists have a straightforward business term for it. They call it the "discount rate." Essentially, as Richard York, Brett Clark, and John Bellamy Foster (2009) explain, the discount rate calculates how much future benefits are worth today. As such, it is the inverse of compound interest which calculates how much investment in the present will yield in the future. It is the discount rate, for instance, that pushes capitalists to do things like, frack, make weapons, relentlessly extract from workers and the environment so that profits may be realized in the shortest time possible. To fall behind in this race is death to the individual capitalist, who in order to avoid that fate must, as Randhir Singh (2006) remarks, consider nature and the human (the only living elements) as infinitely manipulable and renewable. China Mielville (2016) with a writerly precision for words, suggests quite correctly that we use the term Capitalocene instead of Anthropocene.

One of the consequences of such speeding up the cycle of capitalist accumulation is generational. Quite simply, future generations will have to settle the costs incurred now. Chuck was well aware of this, especially how it played out in his chosen field of work, i.e., higher education. In their editorial, "Learning: all together now" in the last issue of *Jump Cut* (no. 57), Julia and Chuck write of the neoliberal reshaping of higher education—the precarity awaiting students upon

graduation and the higher costs of education along with growing student debt. But, they also note that “college” has now expanded beyond the elite and state schools to community colleges, creating campuses that were way more diverse than a few decades ago. They write,

“We can reasonably expect that young people form an essential core for activist change. They have more hope, fewer binding commitments, more energy, and self-interest in seeking progressive change. When they can combine with deep rooted community resources and experience, they are virtually unstoppable, as the recent progress in exposing (though not ending) police shootings, racial profiling, and militarization shows.”

If he were here, we would have found Chuck aligned with the growing activism on campuses and now, amongst school children.

Yet, the costs of neoliberalism are not distributed evenly among all young people. In their editorial on the Black Lives Matter movement (no. 57), Chuck and Julia draw attention to the racial inflection of the biopolitics of neoliberalism, “to the ways in which the state targets or willfully neglects whole groups of people, diminishing their life chances and pushing them to live in substandard conditions.” Citing Dean Spade (2012), they ask that we move away from the call for a “woman’s right to choose” which isolates reproductive choices as an individual right and disconnects it from other aspects of women’s lives, such as class and race. Instead, they echo Spade’s concept of “reproductive justice,” which calls for social intervention and redistribution of resources so that women of color and poor women are genuinely empowered to have children—or not. This means our future horizons can expand only if we imagine a collective future, against delusional fantasies of individualistic escape or concern merely for one’s own or biological children’s future.

And, it was in helping create such an imagination that Chuck worked and played—seeing culture as the space in which we understand the world we find ourselves in and envision alternatives. Referring to their own political radicalization in the 1960s anti-racist and anti-imperialist student movement, Chuck and Julia, write (2016):

“...the Sixties saw the creation of alternatives: of student generated courses; of free universities; of alternative gathering places such as churches and coffeehouses (including significantly, GI coffeehouses during the war); of study groups; of organizations for social, cultural, and political change that ran internal education as part of their activities; of bookstores featuring black, Latino, women’s, gay, leftist writing; of artist-run art galleries; performance and screening venues and series programmed from grassroots interests. The collective aspects of cultural projects, both among those organizing events and serving a community audience, are invigorating. Cultural space works against the competitiveness and isolation of individual cultural bubbles. A broad and diverse cultural sphere projects an alternative and utopian vision. That’s the groundwork for real learning, learning together, in dialogue, for change.”

Jump Cut, now in its forty-fourth year of publication, has been one such sustained effort at laying the groundwork. In his keynote address to the Radical Film Network gathering in New York City, May 3, 2017 (published in this issue), Chuck asks that we analyze the reasons for our failures so that we can learn from them and move into the future.

One of the significant failures in media and cultural studies that impinges on our

ability to create collective alternatives in the Anthropocene, I think, has been the postmodern dismissal of the world as only discursive and its suspicion of human attempts at knowledge as essentially colonizing discourses tied to maintaining institutions of power. While there can be no debate that knowledge is tied to power, that is not all it is and nor is all knowledge merely relative. Such thinking leaves us with little hope for and even less understanding of human creativity and enquiry, which has scant respect for disciplinary boundaries. The Anthropocene, with its threat to life as we know it, has brought a new level of integration of art and science to consider what it means to be a tool-making, linguistic, conscious, and imaginal social animal.

We can see this investigation into life dramatized in contemporary bio-art. For instance, *Victimless Leather* (2008) by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, featured a tiny jacket made of mouse stem cells that was kept alive by a flow of nutrients. The group set it up in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Unexpectedly, however, the jacket kept growing and the curator, Paola Antonelli, had to shut off the incubator. Antonelli said it felt as if she was turning off its “life support.” (Schwartz 2008).



Antonelli's statement recalls Victor Frankenstein's thoughts upon dismantling the woman partner he had almost created for his creature:

“The remains of the half-finished creature whom I had destroyed lay

scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being.” (Shelley 1819 [2008], 193).

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has had a lingering fascination over two centuries. It has, however, become ever more compelling now as we wrestle with one of its fundamental questions, that is, the nature of the human species as a creator who can make and remake the environment and the social and political institutions that govern it, and life itself. The last time I had met Chuck was in March 2017, at the SCMS conference in Chicago—and earned a chuckle because I was proposing that we think of *Frankenstein’s Creature* as the international proletariat, a strange and heady mix of arms and legs and brains and machines and natural elements, singing the Internationale.

What distinguishes the human as a species from others—our “species-character”—Marx claims in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, is “free conscious activity.” Humans, according to Marx, create out of necessity (to survive) but do not stop once the bare conditions of survival are met. Rather, we keep on creating freely, beyond necessity, for the goal is our self-realization, as individuals and as a species, a process without an endpoint or blueprint. In a remarkable essay, *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*, Engels builds on Darwin, suggesting that the human species has participated in its own evolution and our ability to anticipate, plan, and act together could create an impact on nature that far exceeds any other species.

To reconcile our relationship with nature, i.e., with ourselves since the human too is nature, Engels (1876[1934], 274) concludes, “requires something more than mere knowledge. It requires a complete revolution in our hitherto existing mode of production, and simultaneously a revolution in our whole contemporary social order.” The words are prescient even now as solutions to global warming are sought in technology alone—from developing sponges that can scrub Carbon Dioxide off the atmosphere to escaping the earth altogether.

It has now been a century since the Constructivists in the Soviet Union and the Bauhaus in Germany saw the integration of art, science, and technology as capable of making life richer and more human, both for the individual and the community. They designed workers clubs, theaters, schools, homes, and so on. “Everyone,” Lazlo Maholy-Nagy (1947) claimed, has “the biological capacity to create and invent useful form.” In Santineketan in India or the William Morris’ Arts and Crafts movement, artists turned to designing objects for everyday use, drawing inspiration from traditional handicrafts. Santineketan saw itself as part of the anti-colonial movement; the William Morris Arts and Crafts Movement as against industrial capitalism; and Bauhaus and Constructivists as socialist. None of these were art movements in the conventional art historical sense. They represented a politics, practice, and a principle.

We should revisit these earlier explorations of human creativity as we design our curricula to prepare another generation of media makers, theorists, historians, and critics. Art, science, technology, architecture, design, writing, performance, cinema, and photography are coming together in startling new ways—from bio mimicry, which looks to nature for inspiration in designing technology, to the Occupy Movement, which was an experiment in living socially, as much as it was a protest. The same spirit is evident in the longstanding tradition of protest songs that kept up the spirits of farmers who recently marched almost 115 miles from Nasik to Bombay, India against policies whose results have been a devastating rate of farmer suicides, 12,000 a year since 2013 by government records (Dhananjay Mahapatra, 2017).

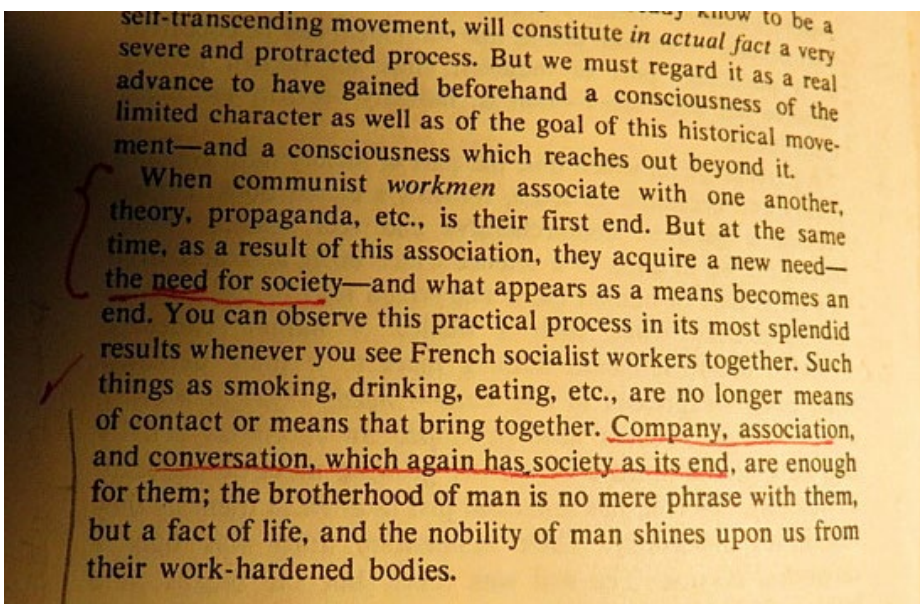
Chuck balked at narrow specializations. His encyclopedic knowledge came from an insatiable curiosity to live life with open arms. Going through Chuck’s study, I

see his commitment to Marxist theory, feminism, queer politics, anti-imperialism and anti-racism; his love for all sorts of pleasurable human cultural expression; and his generous and rigorous attention to the intellectual labor of others. There are no surprises. In editorial comments, tenure letters, advice to colleagues, notes on his readings, I see ample use of Chuck's favorite word, BS (bull shit)—calling out the dominant, the clichéd, and the dogmatic. In sorting out his study, I started to accept that Chuck was no more. I even came to think of it as helping him pack and move out.

But, the tears came the night before I was to leave. Julia asked me to take some of Chuck's books and things I'd like. As I showed her what I wanted, including the fish penholder and the China box, Chuck's passing suddenly became real. No longer would there be the belly laughter, the honest feedback, and the unpredictable ways in which Chuck could make you feel optimistic about the human species.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) And, there was Julia's generosity, who was still so considerate and warm in the middle of this loss.

One of Chuck's books, I now have with me is a 1973 edition of *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* edited by Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski. I hold this old book read by Chuck, with his underlining and notes in the margins, and I feel connected to him—as part of a history we have shared. I first met Chuck in 1993 as a graduate student at Northwestern and realized how truly international socialism is. We already had a common language and understanding, even as I was to learn so much from him subsequently. I smile as I see that Chuck has marked off and then underlined as follows, this section from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Baxandall and Morawski 1973, 132):

“When communist workmen associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of their association they acquire a new need—the need for society—and what appears as a means becomes an end....Company, association, and conversation, which again has society as its end, are enough for them... [Chuck's underlining]”



Living as a human, as a socialist in the Anthropocene means valuing human existence and human society for its own sake. It means having a consciousness that can see beyond capitalism—and building the groundwork for it now. It also means that each generation must carry on the work of a previous one. As I treasure Chuck's notes on Marx's work and accept that he has now passed on to another form and matter, I recognize how deeply historical we are. Yet what we do

matters. Or in the words of Marge Piercy (2015):

“Sitting on your ass too long just makes you one.
We’re only what we’ve tried.”

Laal Salaam, Chuck. You are deeply missed.

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Notes

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1. Deborah Tudor writes this in the margins of her corrections on my draft:

“YES! A thousand times yes to this. Despite his rigorous analysis of labor, culture, and human endeavor, Chuck never lost his love for life and his immense optimism, which I think was partially rooted in his compassion for all living things. To a certain extent, I feel like a light has gone out with his passing—maybe not gone out but wavering and it’s up to us to rekindle it.”

And, Hyun-Suk Seo writes:

"Chuck continues to inform me, pull me gently, and I realize that the deep core of 'Chuckism,' is genuine affection."

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